EARLSCOURT

Alex. Allardyce

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EARLSCOURT

EARLSCOURT

A NOVEL OF PROVINCIAL LIFE

BY

ALEXANDER ALLARDYCE

AUTHOR OF
'BALMORAL: A ROMANCE OF THE QUEEN'S COUNTRY,'
'THE CITY OF SUNSHINE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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EARLSCOURT.

CHAPTER I.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL.

On the southern side of Colpoys Square, in the good town of Earlsport, stands a plain two-storeyed building that at once strikes the visitor as being out of keeping with its surroundings. Its dingy whitewashed walls and small iron-stanchioned windows present a shabby contrast to the tall Corinthian pillars of the Metropolitan and Rural Bank, on the one side, and the lofty portico of the Town Hall, with its broad flight of steps, on the other. The house between is the meanest structure in the imposing square; and the announcement in faded gold letters on the dusty wire-blinds that it is the "Earlsport Bank" seems insufficient apology for its presence in a region consecrated to the best efforts of Earlsport's architectural genius. It was the oldest house in the square. Erections in all the orders and most of the styles had sprung up around it, but the house of Brancepeth Brothers held its ground among its grander neighbours as unabashed as a Quaker in drab coat and square-toed shoes amid a bevy of Court-dressed beaux.

The house of Brancepeth Brothers maintained an attitude to its surroundings that was truly Tory. In vain did progress, in the form of the Earlsport Mechanics' Institute, throw a decorated Early-English glance of scorn on it from over the way; or art, as represented by the statue of the Great Lord Earlsfield, continue pointing a finger of reproof in its direction. Changes came and went on around it; the Earlsport Bank was altogether indifferent. It had been there before any of its grand neighbours; it might still be there when these had returned to their original nothingness.

This old house in the square was an outward and visible sign of the inward obstinacy of Brancepeth Brothers. A similar defiance of popular ideas ruled the whole management of the Earlsport Bank. Colpoys Square stands aloof from the business centres of Earlsport, from the wharf, from the Exchange, and from the railway terminus. But all the influence of all the merchants in the town could not have brought Brancepeth Brothers down to Exchange Street, or even have induced them to open a branch office in that busy locality. Other banks had been brought to Earlsport in the vain hope of bending the Brancepeths' *hauteur*. Yet Brancepeth Brothers still held the first place, and the newcomers were fain to bid for position by building palatial offices in the vicinity of their obstinate rival, although their real business was done in the lower town. Speculative merchants of Earlsport, who read the money articles in the London dailies, and took in telegrams from the Stock Exchange, grumbled that the commercial interests of the town suffered from the apathy of Brancepeth Brothers. You might search the files of the Earlsport Bank from ledger to petty-cash book without lighting on the slightest reference to either "Turks" or "Egyptians." A panic on 'Change only seemed to elate the spirits of Mr Jellicoe, the old cashier, who probably experienced a feeling akin to the Lucretian pleasure at the prospect, from a safe shore, of another struggling with stormy waves. Real property, land and houses, mills and mines, were the securities that found favour with Brancepeth Brothers, and even with these they were not easily satisfied. Mr Jellicoe had a lively recollection of the trepidation which had been caused inside the bank by the news that Brancepeth Brothers were going to make heavy advances on the stock of the Earlsport and Elsedale Valley Railway; and how his predecessor, old Mr Tobin, had foretold the speedy ruin of the house as the certain result of Mr Stephen's rashness. Mr Stephen Brancepeth had just succeeded to the sole management, and the old clerks and friends of the bank felt anxious lest he should prove too "fast" for the traditions of his family. But time had long ago shown Mr Brancepeth to be even more wary than his predecessors had been; and no better security could be tendered in any of the surrounding counties than the name of the Earlsport Bank. The rents of Lord Earlsfield, of the Earl of Elsedale, and of most of the great county landowners, and the money of the Elsedale coal and iron masters, all passed through the Earlsport Bank; and along the run of the Else for forty miles manufacturers and farmers would sooner have doubted the solvency of the Bank of England than have allowed the stability of Brancepeth Brothers to be called in question.

Friday is market-day in Earlsport, and only then is there any bustle observable in the quiet region of Colpoys Square. The market itself is held away down in the town below, in front of the Exchange; but as Mahomet had to go to the mountain, so the Earlsport traders who wished to do business with Brancepeth Brothers were obliged to go up the steep street that led to the bank. A second edition of the market thus frequently comes off in front of the Earlsport Bank; and if you take your stand there any Friday shortly after noon, the odds are that you will see some notables both of the town and of the county.

For instance, to-day, that stout, grey-whiskered, fair-faced man, with square chest, and head well thrown back, whose firm tread makes the pavement ring under him, is Joseph Ormond, who owns all the town of Earlsport that does not belong to Lord Earlsfield. Mr Ormond's possessions are not extensive, but they are very valuable. When Lord Earlsfield, in the exercise of his discretion as feudal superior of the town, had determined that its trade must be content with the harbour accommodation already provided for it, and assured himself that his monopoly of the land made him master of the situation, he overlooked a strip of rocky foreshore lying on the south side of the Else, hard by the mouth of the river. Lord Earlsfield might have purchased this a hundred times over, but neither he nor any one else had ever thought that anything could be made of that mass of cliff with its noisome strip of mud below, until one day this Joseph Ormond, who had come sailing into Earlsport as engineer of a Hull tug, bought it up for next to nothing, and by a liberal outlay of gunpowder and masonry had made a dock, wharves, and warehouses to spring up as if by magic. Lord Earlsfield had seen these things as in a troubled dream, and woke up to find them to be painful realities. His lordship had done all he could to crush the proceedings of the "damned Scotchman," as he designated Ormond — and no one was more circumspect in his language than Lord Earlsfield; but he had missed his chance. He had to bear the indignity of seeing the "damned Scotchman" become one of the leading citizens of Earlsport, and a determined and influential foe to the Earlsfield interest.

You need not expect to see Mr Ormond enter the Earlsport Bank, for he was chief among those who brought the Metropolitan and Rural to the town in the futile hope of bending the stubborn pride of the Brancepeths; and so he turns into the rival establishment, just in time to avoid meeting that tall, florid, youngish-oldish-looking man, who with white hat inclined the least degree to one side of his head, cigar in mouth, and terrier at heel, comes sauntering carelessly along, nodding with great show of frankness to all, and shaking hands with as many as come within his reach. That is the borough member, the Honourable George Colpoys, Lord Earlsfield's brother. Though not generally credited with much political capacity, he knows that affability to constituents is the first and great commandment binding upon a member of Parliament. His majority, moreover, has been less than ever at the last general election; and Mr Ormond has been declaiming as if the salvation of the British empire depended upon the representation of Earlsport being rescued from Lord Earlsfield's control.

"I say, Mold," said the member, stopping a gentleman who was for hurrying past with a hasty salute, "just one minute. What is all this new row in the town about? More of Ormond's work, is it?"

Mr Mold's eyes were blank and expressionless as those of a statue. From their incessant rolling, one got the idea that he had once turned them inside in the act of self-introspection, and had never since been able to get the pupils round to the light again.

"About the races, you mean?" replied Mr Mold, making his eyeballs perform a complete revolution in their sockets. "No, I can't say it is Ormond this time, though of course he will take advantage of it fast enough. You see, they wanted to get up an Earlsport Race Meeting, and I don't know why they shouldn't; Beechborough has races, and Muddleham has races, and why shouldn't Earlsport have races too? Well, a deputation went to Lord Earlsfield asking for a course on the North Dunes, and expecting to get that at least, and possibly a plate or a cup to boot. But unluckily your brother was on his high horse, and instead of receiving them graciously, read them such a lecture on the demoralising influence of betting on the middle and lower classes, as sent the deputation back to town swearing they would clear scores with him when an Earlsfield Court candidate came next upon the hustings. It has raised a nice row, I can tell you, and you may depend Ormond will take advantage of it. If a general election were coming on just now, I wouldn't give sixpence for your chance."

"D—n!" muttered the member, pettishly, but leaving it open whether Lord Earlsfield or the local opposition was the subject of the malediction. "Aren't they always bawling for Parliament to protect them against themselves by Permissive Bills, and closing public-houses, and putting down gambling-clubs, and all that kind of thing? And then if one individually does try to keep temptation out of their way, they turn round and kick. But no one can blame me in the business; everybody knows that I have always supported the Turf."

The Honourable George Colpoys might make this assertion with confidence, for his unfortunate propensity for backing wrong horses was matter of public notoriety; and his predilections for the Turf, which he could very sparingly gratify, had frequently exposed him to impertinent reflections on the part of the voters who were now going to throw him over because his brother would not grant them a race-course.

"You'll find it a spoke in your wheel, though," said Mr Mold, ruefully. "Upon my word, you really ought to look about for something to hedge upon. That twelve hundred to Davis of Dover Street is due again next month, and he was as rusty as possible the last time I got it renewed."

"He will have time to get bright again by Michaelmas, for, according to Lord Earlsfield, that is the earliest date when he has a chance of getting any of his money."

"But, Mr Colpoys," urged Mold, uneasily, "this Davis is a devil of a fellow: as sharp as a needle in matters of business. It was a ticklish enough thing to get him to give us time when the bill last came due. If I had not enlarged on Lord Earlsfield's failing health and Mr Harold's malady, and the certainty of the management of the estates soon coming into your hands, I should have made nothing of him."

"It is no business of mine what arguments you employ," returned George Colpoys coldly, though a slight flush passed across his face, "provided you don't put such statements forward on my authority. But if Davis were to broach such a subject to me, it would be my duty to tell him that you had no right to make any such representations."

"But, my dear Mr Colpoys, for God's sake consider, sir," cried Mr Mold, beginning to get agitated; "you know well enough that though Davis cannot touch you, he can come down upon me. When I gave you my name, you pledged yourself to hold me safe."

"Yes, and gave you two hundred out of the twelve for your risk, Mold," returned the member; "and I would back anybody's bill for half the consideration. But don't be frightened, man; I am not going to leave you in the lurch. I must have time, though; and you'll have to keep Davis in humour, for it is quite hopeless to think of doing anything with Lord Earlsfield just now."

"Couldn't you try your sister?" urged Mold. "Miss Colpoys must have plenty of spare cash by her. It was only a month ago that she drew ten thousand pounds. I know that, for it was through us that the money was remitted to her. She ought to be able to give you a lift."

"But she won't, though," said Colpoys, shaking his head, "for I have tried her already. I can't think what she does with her income nowadays. Beyond millinery, and art fads, and a pony now and again to the missionaries, she used to spend nothing, and now she complains that she is tightened. I don't know what to make of it."

Mr Mold shrugged his shoulders and rolled his blank eyeballs, while the member fidgeted and looked about him for the arrival of a third party to terminate a colloquy that was growing unpleasant.

"I say, Mold," said Mr Colpoys, suddenly changing the subject, and speaking in a low tone, "isn't that old Brancepeth's son who has just gone past—the scapegrace whom he cast off some years ago? I would bet that is the fellow. Yes, he has gone into the bank. Poor devil! I don't expect he will find much of a fatted calf waiting him there. A five-pound note to take him back by parliamentary train to the place he came from is about the most that tears and penitence will wring out of the old man's bowels, I take it."

But while Mr Mold was distorting his eyes in a vain attempt to make out the returning prodigal, Mr Colpoys, dreading lest the bill to Davis of Dover Street might be again alluded to, turned on his heel with a brisk "Bye-bye, Mold," and walked hastily on to the other end of the square. The solicitor again focussed his vision to catch a glimpse of the erring son of the house of Brancepeth Brothers, but the bank door had already closed on the object of his interest.

CHAPTER II.

SAVINGS FROM THE SWINE-HUSKS.

Mr Brancepeth's cast-off son brought no external traces of destitution back with him to his father's bank. Unless the prodigal returns in proper guise, with his gaunt frame clothed in sackcloth, ashes on his bent head, and want plainly stamped upon his pinched face, he is no proper object of compassion; and we ask none for Mr Stephen Brancepeth, who presented himself a picture of health, early hours, and easy living. His clothes bespoke a good tailor; his boots and gloves were irreproachable. A likeable-looking man; his head set upon his shoulders with such a light yet firm poise as Greek sculptors were wont to affect in their works; and a smooth, fair, finely chiselled face which would have pleased them equally well. But there was nothing of that obstinacy or firmness which was the prominent characteristic of all the other Brancepeths, to be seen in his features; nay, the softness of the grey eyes and the easy curvature of the mouth suggested pliability and a facile disposition. A man easy to be led, still more easy to be lured; one that would go with the stream, or even drift with the current. Such was the character which the friends who knew Stephen Brancepeth best gave of him. If the family temper lay under this easy exterior, it would require considerable outside force to draw it to the surface.

Had Mr Stephen Brancepeth's ghost in all the trappings of the tomb appeared at the counter of the Earlsport Bank, it could not have caused greater consternation. The clerk who was the first to notice him started with surprise, and then abruptly turning his back, became absorbed in the study of a sheet almanac. A second began to write as if the stability of the bank depended solely on his immediate exertions; while a third rushed off to serve another customer at the counter whom there had been no hurry in attending to before. Number four, who was forced to face the new-comer, after a timorous glance at him, fairly fled from the room, but presently returned with Mr Jellicoe, the cashier, who seemed to have his full share of the general trepidation.

"I am afraid Mr Brancepeth is particularly engaged, sir," said Mr Jellicoe, with an effort and a most ceremonious bow; "I hardly think he can see you; in fact, I know he cannot."

"I have no doubt you will do quite as well, Jellicoe," said the young man; "it is a trifling matter of business. I don't know that there is occasion to trouble Mr Brancepeth about it."

Mr Jellicoe looked more uneasy than before, bowed, coughed, and rubbed his hands nervously.

"I understand the Dunes House is for sale, furniture and all as it stands, and that application is to be made to you. I got a copy of the conditions and a statement of the price through my solicitors. I am satisfied with them, and if you have no objection I shall be glad to complete the purchase just now by handing you a cheque for the money."

"The Dunes House, Mr Stephen! You buy the Dunes House!" cried the cashier, hardly crediting the testimony of his ears. "Four thousand five hundred pounds!"

"That is the price, I understand. Shall we say it is a bargain?" said the prodigal son, taking out his cheque-book.

"But—but—— Yes, sir, that is the sum. But all this is rather sudden, and I do not know what to say about it. And there are forms to be gone through, and all this is very hurried," gasped Mr Jellicoe.

"I want an answer, 'Yes' or 'No,' at once. There is a large villa for sale a mile up the Else, which, though not so much to my taste as the Dunes House, would still answer my purpose."

"One moment, sir," cried the cashier, in desperation; "I will see if there is any obstacle to your having it;" and he rushed out of the room.

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, Mr Jellicoe ran along the passage, and without waiting to knock, burst into his principal's room. Mr Brancepeth, who had been working intently at his table, looked up at so abrupt an entrance with an expression as nearly approaching to surprise as he ever permitted his face to show.

"Sir, Mr Stephen is in the bank," exclaimed the cashier, breathlessly, without further preface. Mr Brancepeth deliberately noted down on a corner of his blotting-pad the number that he had to carry to his next column of figures, before he made a reply.

"I gave an order three years ago that he was not to be admitted to me, and expressly intimated to you my wish that his name was not to be mentioned."

"But he has come on business—business with the bank, Mr Brancepeth."

"Very well, then, attend to him. I presume the gentleman's business is not such as will require my consideration," said the banker, with a sneer at his subordinate's agitation.

"Sir," said Mr Jellicoe, solemnly, "your son, Mr Stephen Brancepeth, came up to the counter and offered to buy the Dunes House, and write me a cheque on the spot. Four thousand five hundred pounds, Mr Brancepeth—four thousand five hundred pounds; and he must have an answer at once."

In spite of his self-control, Mr Brancepeth started in amazement, and a troubled expression passed over his face. "Four thousand five hundred pounds is the price fixed, is it not?" he asked, with a vacant air, as if he had some other thought in his mind.

"The price fixed, sir."

"Then let him have it."

"Take Mr Stephen's cheque for four thousand five hundred pounds? *His* cheque, sir, for such a sum?"

"Have you any reason to suspect this gentleman's — this Mr Stephen Brancepeth's honesty?"

"God forbid, sir!"

"Then I don't see any reason why you should refuse his name, or why I should have been troubled at all in the matter. Should there turn out to be anything wrong with the cheque, you will, of course, lose no time in communicating with the police. You ought to have been able to deal with the matter yourself without interrupting me," and Mr Brancepeth carried on the "8" that he had noted down on his blotting-paper, and resumed the work which he had had to break off.

"Good Lord!" said the cashier to himself, as he went back to the counter; "it is not more than twelve months since Mr

Stephen wrote to his father, begging for a cheque for a hundred pounds to help him to emigrate, and did not get it. And now he tenders cheques for thousands. I would rather than ten pounds that I had taken physic and stayed at home this morning;" and Mr Jellicoe was quite meek and resigned by the time he went back to the counting-room.

Stephen Brancepeth had meanwhile seated himself, and was busily glancing over the files of the 'Earlsport Mercury,' taking no notice of the curious, awe-struck glances which the clerks were stealthily directing towards him in the midst of their pretended preoccupations.

"We shall be happy to accept your offer for the Dunes House, sir," said Mr Jellicoe, humbly. "The titles are with Messrs Fossebraye & Mold, whom we shall at once instruct to communicate with your solicitors."

"They are my solicitors too, so the matter will be easily arranged. And now I suppose I had better write you a cheque."

So saying, Mr Stephen Brancepeth opened a bulky-looking cheque-book, tried the point of a pen on the blotter, and drew an order on Smith, Payne, & Smiths' for five thousand pounds, Mr Jellicoe watching him with an anxious eye all the while. It was some comfort to the old clerk to note that the cheque-book was not a new one, and that a good third of its forms had been already used. "But if he has gone to the bad, they might have put him up to that dodge," he thought, as a shade of doubt once more crossed his face.

"This is for five thousand," said the prodigal. "I wish the balance put to my credit. As I shall probably live a good deal here, it will be convenient for me to have an account open at your bank. I shall instruct my London bankers to see that a balance is kept up with you for me."

Mr Jellicoe listened to him unmoved. Had Mr Stephen Brancepeth further proposed to pay the National Debt across the counter, the cashier's amazement would not have been increased, for it had already reached the possible limits of human astonishment; and he would probably have accepted the offer with a submissive bow. He took the cheque in his shaking hand, recognised the usual form of the respected house of Smith, Payne, & Smiths, and noted that the signature was the same as had been appended to many drafts—too many drafts, alas! in the young man's undergraduate days at Cambridge.

"Are you certain?—I beg pardon—I trust that this will be duly honoured, sir," said the cashier, with an irrepressible feeling of doubt, and determined, as the unpleasant duty had fallen to him of dealing with his master's son, to neglect no form that would shield himself from future blame.

"Has your thirty years' experience of the Brancepeths led you to infer that there is fraud in the family?" asked Stephen, with his father's sneer, and in a calm, clear voice that was heard by every one in the office.

With a gasp of desperation Mr Jellicoe seized his pen and filled in a receipt. "Thank you, Jellicoe," said the other as he put the paper in his pocket-book; "I am glad to see you looking so well. Good morning. I daresay we shall see each other often;" and he walked out of the office, stopping to light a cigar in the doorway before he stepped into the square.

"Jones," said Mr Jellicoe solemnly to his next subordinate, "I have got that acid on my stomach again to-day: I think I must just step out and get a thimbleful of brandy. Five thousand pounds and an account at Smith Payne's," he inwardly ejaculated, "and not more than twelve months since he wanted a hundred pounds to take him to America. Good Lord! Good Lord!"

CHAPTER III.

THE DOCTOR.

Those races who have imagination enough to reject the anomaly of a neuter gender, have good grounds for classifying a town as feminine. There is something very womanish in the expression of a town's individuality, whether it takes the form of unaccountable choices of members of Parliament, or of jealousy of other cities of its own grade, or of little attempts at self-beautification, or of the more noble and feminine exhibition of works of benevolence and charity. Earlsport, it is to be hoped, was not wanting in these last traits, but she had also her little soft foibles, and chief among these was the way in which she plumed herself upon her Museum, a weakness ridiculous enough if you were to believe Beechborough and Muddleham.

As Beechborough and Muddleham were the nearest towns, it was with them that Earlsport had chiefly to vie. But Muddleham was a mere coal-depot and herring-boat port, and therefore low in the scale of towns according to the opinion of Earlsport, which now sent steamers to the Baltic and occasionally to the Mediterranean. Beechborough was a more proper rival. Not only was it the county-town, the seat of assizes and quarter sessions, but it could boast of an archdeacon and the headquarters of the militia—privileges which might reasonably have been supposed to crush Earlsport out of competition. Beechborough had been a town in the days of the Heptarchy, and it was mentioned in Domesday Book as "villa de Beechburg," while Earlsport had been but an obscure fishing-hamlet when George III. came to the throne. But

Earlsport had substantial proofs of its own importance to place against these historical shadows. It had a member of Parliament all to itself, while Beechborough and Muddleham had to vote in the county. Though Beechborough claimed to have "society," and looked down upon the new men of Earlsport, the latter had wealth and taste and public spirit on their side. Earlsport had its Fine Art Exhibition, such as it was, every autumn, while Beechborough was too poor to patronise painting, and found that its resources could not extend further than the annual Flower Show. Earlsport had two thriving daily papers, while the old 'Beechborough Journal' only dragged on a miserable existence from week to week. Earlsport alone possessed a theatre, a mechanics' institute, and above all a Museum. Probably this Museum might have been a library but for the fact that Beechborough already had an excellent public library, and it did not become an enterprising town like Earlsport to follow in its wake. It might have been a park, but here Muddleham had been beforehand with it. And so when the subject had been mooted, it had been unanimously agreed that Earlsport was to have a Museum, and such a Museum as would make Beechborough, library and all, once and for ever moderate its pretensions.

Enter the Town Hall in Colpoys Square, but avoid the main door facing you, that leads to the chamber sacred to the municipal eloquence of Earlsport. Shun also, if you are a free agent, the entrance to the right, which conducts to the tribunal where justice is daily expounded in terms that furnish the opposition paper with never-ending arguments for the appointment of a stipendiary magistrate. But, guided by the hand that ostentatiously points "To THE MUSEUM," ascend the stair to the left, and on the first floor you will find yourself at the entrance to the institution on which Earlsport especially prides itself. The twopenny catalogue, which you will do well to buy at the door, will soon assure you that here is no mere collection of curiosities, arranged in cases to gratify vulgar sightseers: mangy-looking stuffed quadrupeds, mouldy birds whose feathers fall out when dusted, the usual unwholesome crocodile and bottled reptiles, and a few uninteresting stones to represent the mineral kingdom. No; if you consult the catalogue, you will find that the Earlsport Museum not only comprises "an excellent and extensive cabinet of natural history," but that "it is also rich in special collections which only a *savant* can properly prize." Close by the door you notice a long glass case labelled "Coleoptera from Kaffirland, collected by John Sparshott, F.E.S.," and on the other hand a fine stuffed specimen of the "Black Spur-winged Goose (*Plectopterus niger*), shot near Cape Town by Dr John Sparshott, F.Z.S." A little farther on you will come to a large glass case containing an ugly brownish-grey snake, with a small head lying on the top of innumerable coils. This is ticketed "Tic-polonga (*Daboia elegans*), killed by Dr John Sparshott, Ceylon Sharpshooters, at Newera Ellia, Ceylon;" and at the end of the room, hard by the desk at which sits Mr Wynes, the deputy guardian of these treasures, your eye will probably be caught by a case inscribed "Mollusca of the Elsemouth coast, collected by Dr John Sparshott, F.R.S., curator, Earlsport Museum."

The thoughtful visitor, accustomed to draw his own conclusions, will infer by the time he has got thus far that Dr John Sparshott resembles Ulysses in having seen many men and many cities, or, to speak more strictly, many countries and many animals; and if he is possessed of more than his fair share of human sagacity, he will doubtless infer, from the fact of Dr John Sparshott, Fellow of the Royal and other learned societies, filling the humble post of curator of the Earlsport Museum, that he does not also resemble the Ithacan in point of worldly wisdom. The intelligent visitor would be right, although very likely he would not waste a second thought about the matter, but would go back to Beechborough or Muddleham, or wherever else he came from, to spend his holiday in seeing the lions of Earlsport—a little envious, it is to be hoped, of the Museum—forgetting the name of the curator before he was half-way home. But we are anxious that our readers should feel a little more interest in the man and his belongings. Certainly not on account of his scientific attainments or his fellowship of all the learned societies. We have a proper contempt for any scientist who grubs and plods in the byways of research, framing theories for other men to perfect, and putting no money into his own pocket all the while.

This was exactly what Dr John Sparshott did. In his boyhood people recognised that he had been born a naturalist. When at school he had added three new species to the flora of the county, which his proud father, the Vicar of Trinity Church, Earlsport, showed to Mr Mallow, the great local botanist, who forthwith communicated the fact to the

Linnæan Society as his own discovery, and wrote an interesting paper on the subject and himself which may still be read at length in the 'Transactions.' At Cambridge, as his tutor wrote to the vicar, great things were expected of him, but somehow they never came to pass. John Sparshott was at this time so engrossed in investigating the basis of life in sponges that he could not afford to attend to the prescribed subjects, and he quitted the university unprovided with any of the symbols which have subsequently amplified his name. When sent to walk the hospitals, he walked the Zoological Gardens instead; and though a diligent dissector, he divided his observations between human and brute subjects with more impartiality than the examiners of his day could approve of. However, he got his diploma; but the Board, fearing probably the consequences that might result to their fellow-subjects from Dr Sparshott's treatment, and thinking even the British soldier of too much value to be placed in his hands, interested itself in providing him with an appointment in the colonies, where, as every one knows, life is much less precious in official estimation than within the four seas that bound Great Britain.

So Dr John Sparshott went to the Cape as Assistant Colonial Surgeon, with the object, as the authorities in Downing Street presumed, of affording medical aid to the settlers in Grahamstown; his own view of his mission was, that it was to study the Hottentot and Kafir races, and to obtain a complete collection of skulls of the South African tribes. Such diversity of opinion naturally resulted in difficulties. Dr Sparshott, at a time when fever was prevailing at Grahamstown, chanced to hear that a kraal of strange Kafirs from the far interior had settled only sixty miles to the northward, and straightway set out to visit them. When he came back without any skulls, but with his own head broken and a deep assegai-wound in his leg, those of his patients who had survived the epidemic said many disagreeable things about the unseasonableness of his scientific pursuits, and a memorial was even sent to the Governor about the matter. Representations found their way home, and there seemed a chance that the Colonial Office would set Dr Sparshott altogether at liberty to pursue his researches ; but his elder brother, who was now the vicar of Trinity Church, Earlsport, had been the college tutor of Lord Dockingham, the Under-Secretary, and the Office was loath to proceed to extremes. The Home Government had determined to disband the Royal Ceylon Sharpshooters at an early date, and perhaps it occurred to the Under-Secretary that Dr Sparshott's services might be utilised in reducing the claims for pension that would crop up in consequence; so he was gazetted surgeon to the Ceylon Sharpshooters, and embarked readily enough for Colombo, taking with him his numerous collections as well as a wife and daughter, of whom, by some means inexplicable even to himself, he had become possessed during his South African sojourn.

Mrs Sparshott was a pretty lady, come of a good old family of Dutch settlers, with nothing remarkable about her except a neat way of fixing beetles on cardboard with pins, which was perhaps the accomplishment that had captivated the Doctor; and she made things as comfortable for her husband as possibly could be made for a man who had no appreciation of comfort as it is usually understood. So Mrs Sparshott and her daughter Cloete, who took her name from her mother's family, accompanied the Doctor to Ceylon, where he added much to his collections, and might have gained an extensive experience in liver complaint, a disease which the Slave Island Mess was noted for developing among the gallant Sharpshooters. But here again the Doctor's scientific passion proved too much for the requirements of duty. Just as the gallant Colonel

Peppercorn was prostrated by a second attack of *delirium tremens*, the Doctor set off to Dolosbagie to look for the *Hemileia vastatrix*, which was rumoured to have made its appearance among the coffee-plants in that district. The indignation of the commandant, thus abandoned to the care of a "beastly Burgher," as he called the practitioner of mixed Dutch and Cinghalese descent whom he had to call in, was unappeasable. The whole officialdom of the island was stirred by this act of insubordination and Colonel Peppercorn's outcries; and dire were the punishments which menaced the Doctor when he had caught the *Hemileia*, and chose to return to his duty. About this the Doctor troubled himself little. He had made up his mind that the *Hemileia* was a subject that could be properly discussed only by learned societies in London, and before them he had determined to lay his observations without delay. So he let loose his largest cobra at Jack Vanderspar, the adjutant, who was sent by the colonel to demand his sword and put him under arrest, wrote a hurried resignation, and without waiting its acceptance, began to pack up Cloete and the rest of his collections against the arrival of the next mail-steamer at Galle. The Doctor's *impedimenta* had by this time been reduced by the death of Mrs Sparshott, an event which he perhaps regretted the less as he had long ago discovered that the good woman's scientific interests could not be developed beyond the manual aptitude already alluded to which had gained his early affections. So he departed, utterly indifferent as to the grave questions which he was leaving behind him, as to whether he should be tried by court-martial or brought before a court of inquiry in the first instance, although these were being discussed with all the legal knowledge that the local authorities could bring to bear upon the question. The *Hemileia* was gravely debated by the Linnæan, the Zoological, the Entomological, and the Microscopical Societies, and the discussion even penetrated to the rooms of the Royal and the Physical. The hot controversy between the fiery Irish *savant* Professor Snailey and the obstinate Scottish naturalist Professor Grubb may still be remembered, the former doggedly maintaining that the *Hemileia* was propagated by "wurrums," while the latter was equally positive that it was diffused by "jurms." The daily press endeavoured to mediate between the disputants, and for a whole week the *Hemileia* was "up." But somehow or other Dr Sparshott was allowed to drop out of sight, and by-and-by it was completely forgotten that the *Hemileia* had been almost entirely his own discovery. Thus it happened that while Dr Thrips was sent out by the Colonial Office as a special commissioner to investigate and report upon the coffee pest, and Professor Wingfield made a European reputation by his work upon the 'Phylloxera and the Hemileia,' Dr Sparshott was spending in obscurity the last of his slender savings and beginning to feel the pressure of want in his little lodgings in Cecil Street, Strand. By-and-by, when his funds were altogether exhausted and he could no longer afford to send Cloete to school, and when his brother *savants* were taking a mean advantage of his difficulties by making tempting offers for his choicer specimens, the Doctor began to bethink himself whether a calf might not be fattening for him in the stalls of Trinity Vicarage, Earlsport.

He accordingly went back to his native town, taking with him, of course, his collections and Cloete. The former were with difficulty accommodated in one of the vicarage outhouses; while the latter was made much of by her uncle and the numerous cousins who were springing up with somewhat embarrassing rapidity under the vicar's roof-tree. Cloete now for the first time met with companions of her own age; and a new world of love and sympathy and sociability was opened up to the little girl, who had never known any friends except the native attendants that had done their best to spoil her. But though the vicar was an affectionate brother, he was also the father of a large and increasing family; and the thought of what was to be done with the Doctor and his daughter caused the worthy man a deal of anxiety. As for the Doctor himself, he was already engrossed in the fossil sponges of the few chalk cliffs lying to the north of Muddleham, and gave himself no concern about the future.

It was about this time that it was borne in upon the good citizens of Earlsport that the dignity of their town required some practical vindication against the pretensions of Beechborough with its library, and Muddleham with its park. A park was out of the question; for the elections were just over, and the growing opposition to his brother had so irritated Lord Earlsfield, that it would have been useless to have sought ground from him. There was already an *omnium* *gatherum* of curiosities in a lumber-room of the Town Hall, and when there was a talk of arranging them so that people might see them, and the mayor began to speak of a Museum, the prudent vicar saw a way out of his troubles. There was Dr Sparshott's wonderful collection, which the town might acquire for a very moderate sum ; and where would they find so good a custodian for it as the Doctor himself ? Here they had a Museum formed to their hand, which would not only cast Beechborough far into the shade, but would be unrivalled among provincial towns. Here was a curator, too, whose scientific reputation would make Earlsport famous. So the vicar preached, and his counsels fell upon not unwilling ears ; for the Sparshotts were an old Earlsport family, and had many connections in the corporation. Thus it befell that while the Doctor was still busy with his fossil sponges, his collection was purchased, and himself installed as curator of the Earlsport Museum, almost before he understood what was being done. His salary was very small; and though the corporation generously gave him leave to practise his profession, the citizens set more store by their lives than to commit their ailments to Dr Sparshott's treatment. But the Doctor rose sensibly in public estimation, which had hitherto set him down as little better than waif and vagabond. Now that he had been bought by the corporation, Earlsport must parade and magnify his scientific attainments, condone his hasty temper and irregular work as eccentricities of a high type of genius, and laud the desultory researches which it had hitherto condemned as "fads."

CHAPTER IV.

CLOETE SPARSHOTT.

A SUITE of rooms on the topmost floor of the Town Hall, over the Museum, had been assigned to the curator as quarters, and thither we now invite the reader to accompany us.

The rooms were plain but comfortably furnished. Neither gold nor ebony shone in Dr Sparshott's house; but there were marks of refined taste and female ingenuity that softened the too substantial fittings, and made the visitor forget that the room was part of a public building. A few delicate water-colours hung upon the walls, and a painting or two which had escaped the wreck of such better days as the Doctor had seen. A pretty cottage-piano, the gift of the vicar to Cloete, stood in a corner of the room, with a neatly carved walnut case of well-filled music-shelves hanging above it. There was a bookcase, too, stored with unpretentiously bound but classic works; and a folded-up easel in another corner denoted that art was not unstudied. But though woman's neat efforts and tastes had done much to aid the efforts of the Earlsport upholsterers, provided as per contract, it was Cloete Sparshott herself that made the Doctor's quarters refined and cheerful, and sent away the visitor with a feeling that he had been visiting an enchanted palace. Men who set up as discriminating judges in Earlsport declared that Cloete was the fairest and rarest treasure that the Museum contained, a view from which the Doctor would unhesitatingly have dissented, in spite of his paternal feelings; for was there not down-stairs the most perfect collection of graptolite *Didy-*

mograptus in the world, with two or three fossils that no other collector had ever been able to lay hands on, and all secured by himself?

Cloete herself sits by the window sewing. Where had she got that beauty which attracted the admiration of the other sex and the criticism of her own? Certainly not from the wiry face of her father, with its sharp angles and irregular lines, or even from the Dutch roundness and vapidly regular features of her pretty mother. It had never occurred to the Doctor that his daughter was beautiful, else he would doubtless have sought for some scientific explanation of the fact. But beautiful Cloete Sparshott was, although her beauty was not of the kind that painters generally seek for in their models, or poets delight in assigning to their subjective mistresses. The broad arched brow, with thick masses of dark-brown hair parted evenly and delicately to each side, and a slightly aquiline nose such as we see on Julian coins and medals, if they were too strong for a face of feminine softness, were balanced by the beautiful moulding of the cheeks and mouth, the sweet arch of her lips, the dainty dimple of her chin, the poise and perfection of her neck flowing downwards in gentle lines to her shapely shoulders. The tremulous curve of the mouth spoke of passion, if not disappointment, but drew firmly in at the ends, indicative of a counterbalancing determination. But her womanly charm lay in her deep grey eyes, changing colour with each change of her mind, now apparently melting into soft blue, now flashing with a lustre almost as dark as her hair. She was tall and finely formed, her Eastern childhood having carried her safely through the period when girls generally set either to lines and angles or amorphous fleshliness. Her beauty was of the type that does not depend upon the percipient; it was the essence, not an accident of her being. She was only twenty, but her solitary life, the necessity of thinking for others, and the unfortunate end of her little romance, which we are presently to relate, had given her a gravity and sedateness that made her look older than her years.

Through a half-opened door comes a mixed sound of fussing and monologue running on in a muttered tone of captious commentary, rising sometimes to angry denunciation. This is the usual accompaniment of the Doctor's studies, and Cloete is quite unconscious of the distraction.

"Six, seven, eight cepta, as plainly as possible, with the vanes on the right side of the body opening in a different direction to those on the left. There is an imperfection here. Umph! A stronger glass might make something of it. No, can't make it out distinctly. I must get another specimen though I should have to walk to the Muddleham cliffs for it. But even this is enough to warrant my theory. The cepta themselves produce the calcareous lamellæ. But for the fault of that cursed specimen I should have finished my proof this forenoon. I must get another as long as the facts are fresh in my mind."

After a pause, "What on earth could Milne-Edwards have been thinking of?—and Jules Haime too, who should have known better. If they had had eyes in their heads or a lens in their microscopes they must have seen the origin of the growth. I'll touch 'em up in the next 'Journal.' What's the matter now, Mr Wynes? You invariably make a point of interrupting me if I am particularly engaged."

"It is Alderman Hanmer, sir," replied a meek voice, "who is down below showing the Museum to Mr Fusil, the distiller, from Muddleham. He is asking for you, and I think would like you to point out the specimens."

"Of course, of course," in a querulous tone; "not a minute to think over anything for stupid shipowners, and distillers whose brains are as thick as their own liquor. Of course I must trot at their heels. Get me a long wand, Wynes, and I'll be the showman. Don't they pay me for it? Perhaps they would like Cloete to play a barrel-organ while they are going over the rooms. They'll give me 6d. at the door, perhaps. It wouldn't be the first time that sort of gentry have shown their liberality in the same way."

A shade of anxiety passed over Cloete's face, for Alderman Hanmer was a trustee of the Museum, and a man of great influence in Earlsport, pompous withal and disposed to expect attention; while her father, if he was in one of his moods, was quite capable of leaving the mayor and whole corporation to flounder open eyed and mouthed among the fossils unenlightened by his presence.

"Show them over yourself, Mr Wynes," snapped the Doctor, closing up his microscope with a clash. "Let 'em see the stuffed bear, and the crocodile, and the two-headed calf that came from Beechborough; and don't forget the case of monkeys. You needn't say anything about the Darwinian theory to them, Wynes; *parvenus* are always ashamed of their ancestors," added he, with a grim approach to a joke; "and after they go away, bring up that small box of fossils from the Devon Greensand; I shall want them when I come back."

"If I can only get a specimen with perfect spicules," said the Doctor, addressing himself as he entered Cloete's room, "the thing is done. The chain of evidence is complete. And what becomes of Schmidt's theory then? Where are my boots, Cloete?"

"You are surely not going out until you get dinner, father," said Cloete; "you have eaten nothing since morning. It will be dinner-time in little more than an hour."

"It will take me two hours to walk to Muddleham Point, and the sun sets soon after seven," grumbled the Doctor. "I can't wait dinner. I must get some more specimens while my observations are fresh in my mind. Put a biscuit in my bag, Cloete, and don't wait dinner for me. There's a good girl."

The Doctor proceeded to thrust his feet into a pair of stout walking-boots which showed evident signs of intimacy with the Muddleham rocks, while Cloete put some biscuits and sandwiches into the battered leathern knapsack that had been the companion of the Doctor's wanderings in many parts of the world—the open garner of his treasures.

"Your hat, father," said Cloete, following him to the stair, for the Doctor having armed himself with his stick, was starting with his head too full of calcispongiæ to be conscious of the want of its external covering; "and please don't forget to bring it home with you."

The Doctor only vouchsafed a "Pshaw" to this admonition; and Cloete, returning to the window, sat down with her work on her lap, and looked dreamily out into the square. She was not unhappy, but she could not help feeling that her life was duller and had less brightness than the lives of other young girls. Her father was good company, doubtless, for the fossils and skeletons that blocked up his room, but he had scarcely anything interesting or amusing to say to her. Engrossed as he was in his own studies, he could not enter into her mind, far less give her that sympathy and guidance so necessary to a young girl. As for love, she took it for granted that her father loved her as she loved him: although the paternal affection lacked expression, and probably missed the means of showing itself, it was there all the same. She had few friends except her cousins at the vicarage, and she was too proud to encounter the patronage that she might have had to put up with had she accepted other invitations. The Doctor was related to the oldest and best families of Earlsport; but it was very doubtful whether these magnates appreciated the connection at its true value. At any rate, they could boast more loudly of the Doctor's great scientific reputation in his absence than in his presence. There is something doubtful in the position of a man who keeps a Museum on a salary of only two hundred a-year, even when you throw rooms, coals, and gas into the bargain; and with not a few worthy people the Doctor's scientific attainments only added fresh cause for misgivings, for surely there must be something wrong with a man who knew so much and yet could make so little by his knowledge. There could be no question about his brother the vicar's respectability: though his sermons were prosy and oft-repeated, and he was given to wrangling with the churchwardens, he was decidedly a desirable man to meet in Earlsport society. If the Doctor had been content to earn his living by blistering and bleeding patients in the ordinary way, it would have been different, even though he had made all the less by it, and though there had been a not inconsequent rise in the bills of mortality, for the practice of medicine was a recognised profession in Earlsport; but this science which ended in making men infidels like Huxley or Tyndall, or beggars like Dr Sparshott, could scarcely be looked upon as an altogether reputable pursuit. Cloete could divine what people thought; and though she was proud of her father's learning, and read and treasured up all the praises of his researches in the scientific periodicals, she too would have liked it better if he could have made more money, and worn better clothes, and mixed in society as other people did. But isolation had naturally made her proud, and she had too much spirit to share her feelings with others; she rather tried to convince herself that her father's anomalous position was a distinction, and to persuade herself that it was a privilege to share his secluded life. While she sat thus looking out at the window thinking many things without thinking what she was thinking about, a gentle tap came to the door, a head cautiously introduced itself; and when a furtive glance around took in the fact that the Doctor was not there, the owner of the head, in the shape of a small sharp-eyed servant-maid, rushed into the room.

"O Miss Cloete! Miss Cloete! do look 'ee here one moment just. He came along the street just ahind me as I was a-comin' out from Sperlin' the grocer's, and that brute Sperlin' said afore all the shop, 'Ain't the doctor not goin' to pay his bills again never? It's six weeks past the end of the quarter, and five months since I seen the colour of his money. And he's allus got plenty cash to throw away on dead beasteses and old stones. He should live on 'em, he should,' says he. And that long-tongued Mrs Pargiter was in the shop the whole time a-hearkening to every word; and when I come out, there he was a-going along the street, and I passed him and looked round into his face to make sure. And he is gone into his father's bank this blessed minute. Do 'ee look now, Miss Cloete;" and the girl was obliged to pause in her volubility for sheer lack of breath.

"He? Who, Mary?" said Cloete, languidly; "not Mr Sperling?"

"No, not him, Miss Cloete. It is Mr Brancepeth—Mr Stephen Brancepeth," with special emphasis on the Christian name.

Cloete started, and turned away from the window; but in spite of her effort to master herself, her face flushed, and she was half afraid that Mary might hear the beating of her heart. "You need not get dinner before evening, Mary," she said, struggling to speak in her natural tone of voice. "My father has gone out to the beach, and will not likely be back for three or four hours."

"Very well, miss," said Mary, in a disappointed tone; "there ain't nothing but the cold beef, and that will keep till any time. And I'll get you a cup o' tea, for you hain't eaten anything since breakfast. But lor', Miss Cloete, just to think of Mr Stephen comin' back and walking into the bank just as though nothin' had never happened!"

"You seem interested in Mr Brancepeth, Mary," said Cloete coldly, as she plied her needle busily without raising her eyes. The servant darted a sharp incredulous glance at her, and then resumed her post of observation at the window.

"Here he comes again!" she cried; "do look out, Miss Cloete, do 'ee now." And seizing her young mistress by the arm, Mary almost turned her round. She did look out, and saw Stephen Brancepeth come out of the Earlsport Bank. He looked the picture of complacency and self-satisfaction; he had a cigar in his mouth; and he stopped to leisurely button a glove almost under the window from which his movements were being watched with so much interest, and then sauntered carelessly on, tapping the lamp-posts abstractedly with his cane, until he disappeared round the corner.

"And now, Miss Cloete, I'll just get your tea," cried Mary, rushing off to the kitchen; and Cloete Sparshott continued to look out in the same attitude in which the girl had left her. The tea was brought in due course, but it lay untasted on the table beside her. The evening fell, the last sun-rays had ceased to play lingeringly upon her hair, and the lamps began to glimmer in the twilight of the square below. But Cloete Sparshott was still lost in a reverie of memory, heedless of the flight of the hours. Did she dream of the Future? Perhaps. The Future should be full of possibilities for a girl of twenty; but Cloete's life seemed to have ended before she well knew that it had begun.

CHAPTER V.

CLOETE'S ROMANCE.

YOUNG as she was, Cloete Sparshott had had her day-dream. She had lived and loved, and Stephen Brancepeth had been the hero of her idyl. In a provincial town like Earlsport, where every one knew everybody else, and all about his or her belongings, the love-passages between Stephen Brancepeth and Cloete Sparshott, and the unlucky termination up to which they led, had caused no little stir, and had been narrated in many versions, more or less exaggerated and untrue, which we shall now correct by giving the plain unvarnished facts.

Stephen Brancepeth was an undergraduate

of Cambridge when he made the acquaintance of Cloete Sparshott at the house of her cousin, pretty Mrs Fossebraye, the newly married wife of George Fossebraye, the head of the firm of Fossebraye & Mold, solicitors. Susceptible in temperament, and easily impressed by Cloete's freshness and beauty, Brancepeth at once fell over head and ears in love with the girl almost before she had finally escaped from school. Madge Fossebraye, of whom her friends said that she "muddled things with the best intentions," took the lovers under her wing, opened her house to their meetings, and gave them all the encouragement in her power without any thought of circumstances. George Fossebraye, with more foresight, would have remonstrated, but Brancepeth had been his friend from the time when they were boys together, and it would not be agreeable for him to intervene. So the meetings went on; and though these were frequent enough and open enough to set tattle agoing, matters might have been kept quiet for a longer time had their intercourse been confined to Mrs Fossebraye's drawing-room. But love wants a wider vista than four walls in the hot midsummer days, and the dim twilight of autumn. There were walks along the benty dunes, strolls upon the sands even by moonlight, saunters by the banks of the Else and through the shady walks in the Earlsfield woods. No wonder the town talked. As for Stephen Brancepeth and Cloete, concealment was their last idea. What people were saying about them never once entered into the region of their speculations. Perfect love requires perfect abstraction. Admit the notion of an external universe, and how jagged and uneven does its course become! It knows not time or space—who has not felt the hours to be minutes and the miles but steps when the beloved object was by him? But from such ideals there always comes a rude awakening. We discover that we are conditioned. We are lowered from the felicity of the abstract to irksome concrete details. The glass has fallen, there is a depression of the atmosphere, and the clouds bode rain.

Thus our two young friends lived perfectly happy, as if they had an entire universe to themselves, thinking nothing of the future, except perhaps as of an unclouded sunny day throughout the whole length of which they were to be together gathering daisies and cooing in the shade of the elms. But more experienced people took a different view of their on-goings, and speculated where it was to end. Had Cloete had a mother to guard and counsel her, we may be sure that she would have had no such opportunities of furnishing matter for talkative tongues. The vicar, who had heard of these walks on the dunes and meetings at Madge Fossebraye's, did indeed speak to the Doctor; but unfortunately he happened to be at the time so immersed in his investigations into the amœboid corpuscles of the starfish, that he either never comprehended there was anything wrong, or if he did, forgot all about it. Mr Stephen Brancepeth, it might have been thought, from his six years' advantage of seniority, would have guessed the danger to which he was exposing the girl; but Mr Stephen also was well content with Fools' Paradise; he was perfectly happy, perfectly sincere and honourable; and even if he had had misgivings, his character was not without a fine grain of high-toned selfishness which would have declined to forego the joy of these meetings for any ulterior considerations.

Mr Brancepeth, senior, was not a man who was in the way of hearing gossip. Since his wife's death he had seen little of society except in his business, and he kept aloof from the Earlsport capitalists—out of pride and stubbornness, as they said. When his son was at home, he would hear from him the talk of the town and make his comments on it. At other times he was a recluse, dining by himself and reading or working late into the night. He was not a father to make a confidant of, and Stephen, in trying to love him, only succeeded in fearing him. But removed as Mr Brancepeth was from the tittle-tattle of Earlsport, news of Cloete and his son did not fail to reach his ears, probably through some loquacious customer in the bank parlour who wished to avenge himself for a refusal of accommodation by a bit of disagreeable information. "I hope you are not making a fool of yourself with that Sparshott girl," the banker had said stiffly, and then, as if the expression of his wish was a sufficient command, dropped the subject. And Stephen had said nothing, although half an hour after he had at his tongue's-end an impassioned plea on behalf of his love, which he doubted not must have carried the old man along with it. Alas for those responses that come only when the question has passed away, and for those opportunities that never present themselves until after they have been missed!

The postal revenues doubtless benefited

considerably during the remaining years of Stephen Brancepeth's Cambridge career by the voluminous correspondence that passed between him and Cloete,—warm outpourings of a simple heart's devotion on the girl's side, scarcely less ardent, if more irregular, responses on the other; for it was understood between them that Mr Stephen was reading hard for his degree. When the respectable status of Bachelordom had been attained, and he had quitted the university for, as he imagined, love and Cloete, his father for the first time enunciated his intentions for the future. They were dining alone, as usual, and when the cloth had been removed they were sitting over their wine, with the fire cosily between them. Stephen was to serve for a year in the bank under Mr Jellicoe's supervision, retaining in the meantime his Cambridge allowance, and after that time, if he showed aptitude for business and applied himself to work, he would be admitted into partnership on a share which would increase as time went on, until the whole became his own in the natural course of events. "And," said the old man, "with your advantages and education, if you are fond of public life, I see nothing to hinder you from being returned for the borough. George Colpoys is about played out here, and though I would not go against his lordship, I believe I could secure his support. Earlscourt and the bank between them can return a member for Earlsport any day."

Stephen listened with mixed feelings. He had no particular liking for work, banking was not a profession that had any special attractions; still there was something to an Earlsport man, and with Earlsport feelings, in the idea of being a partner in Brancepeth Brothers. There is pleasure too, as well as distinction, in being a member of Parliament, "Stephen Brancepeth, M.P." His beautiful wife, too—what a sensation she would cause in London society! But then, what would his father say about Cloete?

There would doubtless be a difficulty as to her; but Stephen had made up his mind, and with all his pliability and mental indolence, he had his full share of the Brancepeth obstinacy. It never entered his mind for an instant that he would not carry his point.

"Well, sir," he replied, when his father had finished, "I shall do my best to meet your wishes. I cannot say that I feel any special fitness for banking or ambition for Parliament. What would you think of my marrying? There is nothing like marriage for steadying a man down for work."

"I don't believe in early marriages," said Mr Brancepeth, hastily; "I trust you have not got entangled at Cambridge in any way?"

"No, certainly not," replied Stephen, readily; "but you see——"

"Of course there might be circumstances under which an early marriage would be recommendable. If wealth and position came in the way, these are not to be neglected. But though I have considered the matter carefully, and kept my eyes about me, I know no one with whom I would recommend you to commit yourself at present."

"I am afraid, sir, my views are humbler than yours. I shall never marry except for love. I have been engaged for more than a year to Miss Sparshott, the Doctor's daughter."

"Stephen Brancepeth!" cried the father sharply, facing round upon him, "are you a born fool?"

"I see no good making a fuss about it," said Stephen, doggedly; "the thing is done. We both love each other, and only want your consent to make us happy."

"Upon my soul!" began the banker, and then changing his tone, "Did I not warn you against that girl more than a year ago?"

"I am old enough to judge for myself," retorted Stephen. "Miss Sparshott is a lady of quite as good a family as our own. We need not marry for mercenary motives."

"Speak for yourself," retorted his father.

"So far as I am aware, all the means you have in the world is the five hundred pounds which your mother bequeathed to you on her death."

"I am your son, sir—your only son."

"All the more reason why I should prevent you from ruining yourself."

"What I mean is, that you will surely do me justice, however greatly you disapprove of my choice. You have no relative in the world except myself. I am willing to follow up the views you have put before me in every other respect, but you must place me in such a situation that I and my wife shall be able to live in Earlsport, where we are known, in the position that we should occupy. I regret that my marriage should annoy you; but my word is passed to Miss Sparshott, and I will not break it."

"Then hear me pass my word," said Mr Brancepeth, rising to his feet, and fixing his eyes, flashing with anger, sternly on the face of his son; "neither shall I break mine. If you marry this girl, I completely disown you. You shall never have another farthing from me, nor any other kind of assistance. You shall leave this house to-morrow, and henceforth we shall be not strangers merely, we shall be enemies."

"It is all very well to talk," said Stephen, with growing anger, "but you will find that I am not to be moved by idle threats. You cannot deny me at least justice. I want an adequate maintenance for myself and my wife, and you shall have no more trouble with us."

"You shall not have a farthing except the £500 that belongs to you. I have said it."

"Am I, then, to be denied justice altogether—to be deprived of my rights?"

"You have no rights."

"My mother brought you £25,000. Am I not entitled, as her only child, to a share?"

"It was too little to compensate me for the trial of her having borne me such a son."

"You shall not insult my mother's memory. You will repent this, father. The day will come when you will be sorry for your treatment of me."

"I shall wait for that day," returned the banker calmly, and gathering up his newspapers, he retired to the library.

Next morning a note was handed to Stephen before he was up. It contained his father's cheque for £500, with the accrued interest, and a receipt already filled up for his signature. This was all. The young man felt that the glove was thrown down to him, and he would not have been a Brancepeth if he had hesitated to pick it up. That afternoon he started for London.

He did not trust himself to see Cloete; he could not bear to witness the pain that his tidings would inflict. Without Goethe's genius, Stephen had a great deal of the great man's intellectual selfishness. But from London he wrote her what was meant to be a cheering letter. He could not conceal altogether the magnitude of the sacrifice he was making for her sweet self; no doubt he mentioned the partnership in the bank, and the seat in Parliament; but he assured her that he would resolutely set to work and conquer fortune to make a home for her, where they could live for ever in happiness and comfort, though not in splendour.

Cloete wrote imploring him to give her up; to be reconciled to his father. She could not bear the thought that she was standing between them. She could never forget him, never love any one else, never marry another; but she besought him to give her up and become friends with Mr Brancepeth.

Cloete Sparshott was perfectly sincere in the midst of this first great trouble which had fallen upon her young life. It was as if she had awoke from a dream and found herself confronted by realities which had to be wrestled with in earnest. If a sacrifice must be made, it was right that she should be the victim. Stephen had everything to lose, and she—she had only a heart to break. "Give me up, oh give me up!" was the burden of her letters. "I am wretched, but the idea of what you must be suffering for me makes me still more unhappy."

Stephen Brancepeth in reply assured her that no power on earth would ever make him give her up, but his letters did not tend much to lighten the load of sorrow which was weighing down Cloete. He could get nothing to do; he would do nothing that was offered him; he found his Cambridge education rather a hindrance than a help. He tried journalism without success; literature with even less satisfactory results; he could paint as an amateur—the print-sellers at Cambridge who had framed his pictures for him had flattered him about the fortune he could make with his brush; but he found he would scarcely be able to keep body and soul together by art as a profession. He had never had to cultivate small economies, and now found his money gliding away like snow in June. One can live more cheaply on the Continent—what native of our islands since the days of Kenny Dodd ever succeeded in doing so?—and thither Mr Brancepeth repaired to spin out the remainder of his small capital as long as possible. Disappointment preyed upon his spirits, and his health gave way. At last he was compelled to own himself beaten—beaten in so far that he would condescend to write to his father for money to take him out to the colonies, there to try his fortune. Of this letter no notice was taken; and sick at heart, Stephen Brancepeth took to bed at Montpellier, and lay for weeks ill in body and worse in mind. Part of his story during this time of sickness will have to be told afterwards; it need only be said at present that he wrote, as soon as he was able, to Cloete, and told her that he had renounced all hope of ever being able to make her his wife—all prospects of love, happiness, or peace in this world. He would never condemn her to ally herself to the fortunes of a ruined and broken man, one whom the Fates were determined to pursue to destruction. She was free—free to seek for her happiness apart from one to whom that condition would be for ever denied; but throughout life and at the moment of his death she would still hold the chief place in his thoughts.

There was no address sent with this letter, as if the writer had wished to deprive Cloete of the chance of assuring him that misfortune would never alter her constancy. She was stunned with the crash of all her hopes and dreams; but when she recovered, she was a woman and a love-sick girl no longer. She could calmly review the past and see how foolish they both had been. She had allowed herself to be carried away by her passion. All those long walks and clandestine meetings had been wrong, had been unmaidenly, and Cloete felt as if she could have killed herself when she recalled them. And was Stephen Brancepeth really the hero she had fancied him, the man who could buckler her against the world, the man for whom she could treat with scorn the gossiping tongues of Earlsport and the admonitions of her friends? He had not conquered the world for her sake; nay, had he not rather fallen in the first course? Her idol was to some extent shattered; she took it down from its pedestal, but still she could not help worshipping it in secret.

Yet he had come back, well in health, apparently well in circumstances, and Cloete's heart beat all the more quickly and tremulously. It was nothing to her, she told herself; her romance was finished. She was no longer a sentimental, foolish girl; she was a woman schooled in sorrow, and possessed of a woman's experience and control. He had probably made it up with his father by renouncing her. Well, she had entreated him to do so. And yet, and yet——

CHAPTER VI.

EARLSCOURT.

THAT excellent little work, 'A Guide to Earlsport and its Environs, with Notes on Elsedale Antiquities and Scenery' ('Earlsport Mercury' Office and all stationers), informs us that in the reign of Alfred a certain Norse Jarl named Swein sailed his pirate ship into the mouth of the Else, and having gathered together all that he could plunder, built for himself a stronghold which was called the Jarl's Court, and settled his followers in a hamlet close to the natural harbour formed by the river as it flows into the sea, which henceforth went by the name of the Jarl's port. To this ancestor the Swaynes, who were lords of the manor of

Earlscourt and the lower stretches of Elsedale in Plantagenet and Tudor times, referred their origin, and there seems no reason why we should cast discredit upon the belief.

Referring to the authority which we have already cited, those who are anxious to follow the fortunes of the Swayne family through the wars of the Roses, and other commotions miscalled civil, we may mention that in the time of James I. the family dignity and possessions threatened to devolve on a female; and though the former was unimpaired, the latter appear to have been considerably dilapidated. A generation before, one of the daughters of Earlscourt had married John Colpoys, a citizen of London, who was fishmonger to Queen Mary of zealous memory, and accumulated a large fortune through the pious observances of her Court. He was afterwards sheriff of London under Elizabeth; and his son, John Colpoys also, was among the earliest of her successor's Nova Scotian baronets. The rising Colpoyses had helped the declining Swaynes, until the possessions of the latter had been all mortgaged to the former; and Sir John Colpoys had gallantly settled the matter by taking the lass with the land. The lands of Earlscourt thus remained in the Earl's line, although on the distaff side, and the Colpoyses were as proud of their Norse progenitor as ever the Swaynes had been.

From the days of Sir John down to the American war there is nothing to record of the baronets of Earlscourt. They were loyal to King Charles, but did not draw their swords for him; they abhorred Cromwell, especially after the Restoration, but never thought of taking up arms against him. They waited quietly until the glorious Revolution of 1688 was fairly effected before making up their minds that it was a signal deliverance for the country. Under the Georges they bought boroughs, and made themselves and their members a power in Parliament. Their politics were not of a decided cast, to judge from the way in which their influence was thrown now in one scale, now in another. Sir George Colpoys's conduct was said to be the foundation of Walpole's aphorism, "Every man has his price;" but this is probably a slander originating with the detractors of the family, of whom there have always been plenty.

The services which Sir Robert Colpoys rendered to the State—he could command four votes in the House, besides giving his own—during the stormy debates on the American rebellion, induced his gracious Majesty to raise him to the peerage; and he was henceforth known in Earlsport, where a statue was erected to him, as "the great Lord Earlsfield," and he is thus denominated in the 'Guide-Book.' The superficial persons who write histories of England have, however, either carelessly overlooked or jealously ignored the eminence of the first Lord Earlsfield. There had been a promise, too, of subsequent promotion to the dignity of an earldom, but when the four Earlsfield votes in the Lower House were scheduled away in the Reform

Bill of 1832, the Earlsfield claims were disfranchised with them. Sweyn, the second Lord Earlsfield—it was a trait not peculiar to the Earlsfield family that their names got more Norse the further they got away from the eponymic Norseman in their pedigree—the second Lord Earlsfield, we say, would have hid his head in his mantle, if he had worn one, at the national ingratitude. It was the doing, too, of the Whigs, whom he and his ancestors had always followed and served, and henceforth the Earlsfields boasted more of their sacrifices in the cause of freedom over the Reform Bill than if they had given a Hampden to the field or a Sidney to the scaffold.

But enough of these dryasdust details, which are, however, essential to the reader's comfort and understanding. Let us now make the acquaintance of the Earlscourt family at the time when events are about to bring us into intimate relations with its members. And here we may conveniently borrow from Sir Bernard Burke's invaluable work.

EARLSFIELD, BARON (Olafe Swayne Colpoys), of Earlscourt, co. Siltshire, in the peerage of the United Kingdom, *s.* his father as fourth baron 24th May 1850 ; *m.* January 1851 Margaret, youngest daughter of Henry, third Lord Beechborough, and by her (who died 30th September 1854) has issue a son—

HAROLD SWAYNE, born 13th March 1852.

Turning back to the family of Olafe, third Lord Earlsfield, we find it to comprise the following members—

I. OLAFE, his successor.
II. GEORGE SWAYNE, M.P. for Earlsport.
III. JAMES ; formerly a Colonel in the army ; *m.* Eliza, widow of Captain Bolter, and has issue.
I. HENRIETTA, *m.* Major Firebrace, 15th Dragoon Guards, who died October 5, 1857.
II. DOROTHEA.

Over these latter entries in Burke, Lord Earlsfield could not help casting mournful eyes. The ladies of Earlscourt, since the days of the first Ladies Colpoys, had always been discreet and sensibly behaved women, and had never burdened the estates with such hosts of sons and daughters as had broken down the fortunes of the Swayne family. They always produced a male heir, as was their bounden duty, and there might perchance be two sons in every second or third generation as a wise measure of precaution. As a rule they had eschewed daughters, and if one accidentally made her appearance, she either died young or strengthened the family connections by a good marriage. But the mother of the present peer had not been so circumspect, and had recklessly presented her lord with three male and two female children. Conduct so inconsiderate, so at variance with the traditions of the family, could not fail to affect the filial respect which Lord Earlsfield owed to his parent's memory, especially as he himself had mainly to bear the burden of her domestic prodigality. His brothers had not been successful in their respective careers; his sisters had only been a trouble. Mrs Firebrace, who since the death of her husband—an event which the gallant major's relations brought directly home to the lady's temper and extravagance — had resided at Earlscourt, and had contributed in no small degree to add to the dulness and discomfort of the household — Mrs Firebrace had been a woman of the world, had loyally assisted her husband in running through his fortune, and had quitted society on his death with a reputation that was not, as ill-natured people said, altogether flawless. She had now become exceedingly devout after a disagreeable fashion, and took great pains to make every one understand the saving change that had come over her. "If I had died when he died, I should have gone to hell with the major," she was wont to remark, in the assured confidence that no such fatality was likely to overtake her now. It would be unkind to say that Lord Earlsfield sometimes wished husband and wife had never been divided, but Mrs Firebrace was certainly one of his greatest worries; and he would never have had her in the house if another home had been open to her, and if he had not had a dread that she would be safe only under his own eye.

Dorothea, his younger sister, was an heiress in her own right, but to the head of the house she was both a trouble and a responsibility. Her aunt, Lady Pye, the East India director's widow, had bequeathed her large fortune to Dorothea Colpoys, but it was fettered with the condition that she must marry to the satisfaction of Lord Earlsfield; and in the event of her dying a spinster, the money was to revert to the possessor of the title. Suitors were not wanting, nor was the lady loath; but the high standard of qualifications which Lord Earlsfield had set up for his sister's husband did not seem likely to be attained. One aspirant after another was dismissed on what Lord Earlsfield declared to be sufficient grounds; and though Dorothea fretted and wept, and murmured that her life was being sacrificed for her money, she stood in too great awe of her elder brother to venture on open rebellion. Meanwhile she was allowed the full use of her fortune; she availed herself of her liberty as a *femme sole* to travel about and reside where she pleased — and as a rule, any other place pleased her better to reside at than Earlscourt. Yet she chose to consider the old house as her home; and when she returned thither from her travels, Lord Earlsfield would mark with satisfaction that her fresh colour was fading, that wrinkles and crow's-feet were beginning to threaten, and even cosmetics were being freely resorted to. If she could only be safely conveyed into unmarriageable spinsterhood, Lord Earlsfield would be a happier man, and his son a very much richer one. But Dorothea was yet young, comparatively speaking, and though Lord Earlsfield had made up his mind that she should not marry if he could prevent it, yet there still remained the possibility of some suitor turning up to whom no exception could be taken with any show of justice. To any one under the rank of an earl or a marquis Lord Earlsfield felt that he could righteously refuse to give his sister in marriage, and he was accordingly careful to invite no middle-aged bachelor or widower of that rank to Earlscourt while his sister was at home.

As for his brothers, Lord Earlsfield could only regard them as a source of unmitigated trouble. He tolerated George, the member for Earlsport, whose apathy in the House, impecunious habits, and occasional lapses from the paths of propriety and rectitude which a member of the Earlsfield family and a British legislator ought to follow, caused him constant vexation. Yet in some respects George was a necessary evil. It was right that Earlsport should be represented by a Colpoys; and George's assistance might even be wanted to carry on the line, failing Lord Earlsfield's own son. Lord Earlsfield did not intend his son to fail, and had made all the arrangements in his own mind to prevent such a calamity; but he could not afford to altogether ignore the fact that Providence might order events not exactly in accordance with his intentions, although he, Lord Earlsfield, almost felt that he would be wronging Providence by any such supposition.

His feelings towards his youngest brother were quite different. From first to last he had been a fatal mistake. In the first place, he had no business to be; but having been, his duty was to be as little burden and bother to his family as an intruder could be. But Colonel James Colpoys did not take this view of the relationship. True, he never now turned up at Earlscourt, and had held no communication with his lordship since the latter had refused once for all to aid him with another penny in his difficulties. But out of sight was not out of mind in the case of Colonel Colpoys. The omniscient organs that record social scandal had a tender regard for the doings of Colonel

Colpoys. They spoke of him as "Jim Colpoys," as "the Hon'ble Jim," or as "Colonel Jim," in a tone of familiar affection, probably out of gratitude for the paragraphs which he afforded them. They informed Lord Earlsfield of the extent of his brother's losses to a penny in backing Mayflower for the Oaks, and how the "Hon'ble Jim" was conspicuous by his absence on settling day. Or, under the smart heading "Jim not a Joseph," his lordship would read that his brother's differences with Sir Potiphar Grains were to be settled by Lord Penzance, and not at Ostende as the colonel had proposed. Or that the retirement of Jim Colpoys from Arthur's was not unremotely connected with the violent altercation which Sub-Lieutenant Greene's parents had raised over a game of hazard played there and its results. These facts were bad; but the familiarity with which the journalists treated his brother's name—the family name — was, in his lordship's opinion, a thousand times worse. Great heavens! the idea that his brother, the brother of Lord Earlsfield, the great-grandson of the Great Lord Earlsfield, the lineal descendant of Earl Swein, should be spoken of by these vulgar wretches in their public prints as "Jim"! It was too much; and Lord Earlsfield distinctly repudiated being his brother's keeper any longer. Mrs Colonel Colpoys was, his lordship understood, a fitting helpmate. She was the widow of Captain Bolter, a well-known racing and gaming man, and her personal attractions, and the use she put them to, had led to her being known as the "Decoy-duck" at Homburg and Baden-Baden. Yet the children of these people were near akin to the title; and failing his own son and his brother George, Lord Earlsfield knew that the colonel's eldest son would be some day master at Earlscourt. The idea that the maintenance of the Earlsfield honours and dignity might devolve upon a branch which had never been able to preserve the little respectability which they had possessed in their present obscure station, would sometimes prey upon Lord Earlsfield like a nightmare after reading those paragraphs.

There was, however, another trouble of a more personal and deeper character at Lord Earlsfield's heart than the worry and annoyance which his brothers and sisters caused him. He was a widower, with only one son, and that son, people whispered, was mad. This Lord Earlsfield would never allow, but in his heart of hearts distressing fears of his son's future were never long at rest. There was a thin strain of insanity among his late wife's family, the Beechboroughs, but it had never manifested itself in worse phases than peculiarity, and violence, and gentlemanlike excesses, and none of them had ever had to be put under restraint. Harold Colpoys had from his boyhood been subject to fits, which only passed away to leave his mind for a time greatly obscured. The few authorities whom the father condescended to consult were not sanguine.

They recommended a private tutor in preference to Eton and the University. The boy showed a strong taste for mathematics and science, greatly to Lord Earlsfield's delight, who remembered that the Marquis of Worcester, in the seventeenth century, who had been regarded as mad, had showed similar predilections, and yet made a reputable peer, and was the father of a duke. An excellent tutor and companion had been found in the shape of a learned officer of Engineers, whom Lord Earlsfield had tempted by a large salary to undertake the delicate charge. Captain Carshalton and his pupil mostly resided on the Continent, travelling hither and thither, and taking up their quarters for greater or less periods at the chief centres of learning and science. Lord Earlsfield was greatly cheered by the good news of his son's mental and physical progress; but now Captain Carshalton had been called away to a valuable colonial appointment, and Harold must return to Earlscourt. He was now nearly one-and-twenty, and could no longer be kept in leading-strings, if he was to be held as a responsible person.

To his speedy return Lord Earlsfield was looking forward with a strange mixture of anxiety and tenderness. His love for his son was the soft point in his hard character, and he sometimes trembled to think how wholly the complete fabric of his happiness and plans leant upon this somewhat frail prop. Lord Earlsfield loved his son with a father's affection and something of a mother's jealousy. He knew that the other members of the family regarded Harold with nervous apprehension on his short visits to the Court; and his intense affection made him suspicious that they would be pleased to see the future head of the house declared insane, and to enter themselves on the enjoyment of his heritage. His lordship had, however, deep-laid schemes of his own, which he never breathed to mortal, for preventing such a contingency. All that was tender in Lord

Earlsfield's nature was bound up in Harold, and for him there was no sacrifice which it would be too great to make. The young man would be rich, rich beyond the majority of his equals in the peerage; and though Lord Earlsfield had saved and exacted and denied all his life long, he felt that, could the next step in the line be safely bridged over, the salvation would be cheap at the cost of all his accumulations.

There is only one other inmate of Earlscourt whom we need particularise. Why Mary Donne should have her home at the Court was a question that people had never been able to answer to their satisfaction. That her father, Colonel Donne, a distant cousin of the Colpoys family, had been the closest and only intimate friend of Lord Earlsfield's life, that they had been schoolfellows, and had sat together in the House of Commons, was held by those who thought they knew Lord Earlsfield best, to be no sufficient reason for his generosity to the colonel's orphan. Still less did it explain the fact that Mary Donne was the only one of the family who was exempted from Lord Earlsfield's sternness and arrogance. He had even cautioned his sister, Mrs Firebrace, against worrying the girl with her austere religious views, and told her point-blank that if she did not make Miss Donne comfortable, she would have to provide herself with another home. Mrs Firebrace, who had no wish to resign her position at Earlscourt, had given a grumbling assent, but did not dissemble her conviction that both her brother and Miss Donne would sooner or later find themselves in proximity with her late husband, of warm memory. And so Mary Donne, from the time she quitted school, had settled down at Earlscourt, the only glimpse of bright young life to be caught in its grim and cheerless circle.

CHAPTER VII.

CLUB TATTLE.

THERE are not many idle people in Earlsport, and the club seldom begins to fill up until after five o'clock. Then as business drops off in the town below, people crowd into the club to read the London morning papers, which are afternoon ones in Earlsport, to have a cigar and perhaps a quiet game of billiards, or a rubber at whist, until the time comes to present themselves at their own dinner-table. There were no bow-windows to lounge at in the Earlsport Club, nor was there any particular want of them—for the building occupied a corner in a quiet road, and looked across at the respectable windows of Messrs Sperlin Brothers, family grocers and wine merchants. It was not the fault of the club that it occupied such an unobtrusive situation, for it had both the means and the inclination to establish itself in more pretentious premises in Earlsfield Square. But Lord Earlsfield had his own idea of the fitness of all things. He willingly conceded the right of the Earlsport citizens to be social in a quiet *bourgeois* fashion, but he would not be doing his duty by them were he to encourage ostentation and extravagance. And as Lord Earlsfield was the owner of Earlsport, the club had no choice but to remain where it was; so, though his lordship had once been a patron, and though his name still figured in the list of life members—it had long ago been omitted from the trustee and committee lists—the club as a body resented this exercise of terrestrial providence, and conceived itself to have a grudge against him.

Grumblers said the coffee and reading

rooms were little better than 'Change warmed up again; and the smoking-room was the natural refuge of those who had no business of their own, or who were able to leave their mercantile interests behind them in their counting-houses. And here in a particular corner, round a big arm-chair, which in club slang was known as the "seat of the scorner," were wont to gather those who had any gossip of which to unburden themselves. The "scorner's chair" was sacred to Squire Horseley, who had once been a landed proprietor in the county, and who, like Abou Hassan, had spent first the one-half of his fortune, and then tied up the rest in a snug independence, which he did not care to augment, and could not diminish. Like all men who are cynics more by profession than by temperament, he delighted in scandal, and never failed to cap a bad construction by a worse. When he had hounded on the pack until the quarry was fairly run to earth and devoured, he invariably turned round and hunted the hunters, until they had little reason left to congratulate themselves on having joined the chase with him. Ned might have set up for a satirist had he chosen to conclude his talk with a moral; but he was on too formal terms with his own inner nature to dream of taking such a liberty with it.

To Squire Horseley, occupying his usual seat with a large glass of vermuth-and-soda by his elbow, and a pipe full of strong and bitter tobacco, enter Charley Hanmer, the Alderman's son, and Tom Cotts, the managing director of the Earlsport and Baltic Steam Navigation Company, which owned a steamer running three times a-year to Riga, and a fleet of smacks engaged in the coal traffic of the coast—two persons of no small consequence in their own estimation. The Squire eyes them askance, relapses into his newspaper, and patiently waits for them to open their budget.

"Beastly hot afternoon," says Charley; "and this place is stuffy as an oven. I can smell Sperlins' herrings here as well as if there was a barrel of them in the room."

"Don't wonder at that; he buys them from your father," comments the Squire, without raising his eyes.

"I say, Horseley, have you heard that Brancepeth's young hopeful has turned up again?" put in Cotts. "I met him as I was coming up to the club, apparently in full feather. I don't know where he has been, or what he has been doing, but he must have come from some place where the art of cutting is cultivated to perfection. I was going to cross over and speak to him, when he showed me the cold shoulder as plainly as possible."

"There was always a deal of self-respect in the Brancepeth family," remarks the Squire, absently.

"He is on his legs again, at any rate,"

said Charley Hanmer. "He has bought the Dunes House all to himself. Paid six thousand down on the nail for it; and Repps the upholsterer told me that he has taken all the furniture at valuation. Gad! when I was at Bullong with my sisters the summer before last, I saw him going about with a sketch-book under his arm, and wearing boots with hardly a heel to them."

"So I have heard," said Ned; "you told it all over the town as soon as you came back."

"I suppose, then, old Brancepeth killed the fatted calf, and fell upon Master Stephen's neck in the bank parlour. It must have been very touching to see," observed Cotts.

"Very," replied the Squire; "there was always so much natural affection among the Brancepeths; and the banker must have inherited 'the Brothers'' shares of it as well as of the stock. I always thought their spirits must have become part of the capital when they died."

"You are all wrong about young Brancepeth," returned Charley Hanmer. "I happened to be in the bank when he came in, and you never saw such a scare as he gave them. The clerks all turned their backs upon him; and old Jellicoe shook as if he had been a bailiff with an execution. He never asked for his father at all, but pulled out his cheque-book and paid for the Dunes House as carelessly as if he had been a partner in Rothschilds'. I waited and saw the whole thing. It was as good as a farce to see the consternation among Brancepeth's people."

"A most improper proceeding," said Ned, in a tone of grave reprehension. "By all the laws he ought to have come back in rags and repentance, and been kicked out with a shilling and a ticket for the soup-kitchen. Shocks my faith in an overruling Providence. But where has he got the money, Charley?"

"How should I know? He didn't look

as if he was on the way to make much when I saw him at Bullong. I wish he would tell me where he picked it up, and whether there is more to be had there as readily."

"He must have broken the bank at some gambling place and brought home the plunder," suggested another man who had been drawn towards the group by the sound of their conversation.

"Or gained the first prize in a German lottery," put in Tom Cotts. "I knew a man once who was set up in that way."

"He was a painter, was not young Brancepeth?" asked the new-comer. "Perhaps he may have made a great hit with a picture, and sold it for a fortune. Any one seen anything about it in the papers?"

"No," said Ned; "curiously enough, I haven't seen anything about it in the papers, though I daresay Stephen Brancepeth's paintings were bad enough to be praised in them."

"Bah!" said Dr Horniblow, whose knowledge of the private affairs of Earlsport far exceeded the limits of his practice, and who now slid his chair into the circle. "You don't know anything about the matter; and what is more, you would not guess for yourselves when this time next year comes."

"Every one has not your opportunities of getting at people's secrets, or your knack of turning them to account, Horniblow," said Mr Horseley with great blandness: "but read the riddle to us."

Dr Horniblow felt somewhat doubtful whether he was being complimented, but no one minded, or professed to mind, what Ned Horseley said.

"The fact is, the old banker has come completely round, but does not like to own his softness. But he has given the young one a very liberal allowance, and they are to carry on before people as if the quarrel still existed, till some excuse comes round for openly making up the peace. I had a stiff tussle, I can tell you, with the banker before I could get him to make any terms."

"I can easily suppose that," rejoined Horseley, "and it is so good of you, Horniblow, to expose yourself to odium and snubbing among your patients, by trying to make peace among them. They told me the other day in the bank that old Brancepeth was unwell, and Jellicoe added that 'that fool, Horniblow, had given him an overdose of medicine, and they had had to send for Dr Pegus.' That, of course, would have merely been a figurative allusion to your good advice."

"Of course, of course," said Dr Horniblow, colouring and shifting somewhat uneasily on his seat; "that is the way the banker would put it, and I am glad he saw Pegus. Pegus is a young man who deserves to get on. He has fair abilities, Pegus has, and he will get more experience as he gets older."

"Did you read that leader in the 'Mercury' this morning about Lord Earlsfield's refusal of the race-course?" inquired Charley Hanmer of the company in general. "His lordship must have felt touched up a bit. It was not half-bad telling him that he must give up imagining that he was a feudal baron of the middle ages, and that the people of Earlsport were not his villains, as he would find out at the next election. Only Slasher misspelt 'villains' with an 'e' instead of an 'a,' you know. He is a half-educated beast, Slasher, with all his pretensions."

"I wonder to hear you say so, Hanmer," rebuked Ned. "Don't you see by every leader that he writes that he has all the classics at his finger-ends? How else would he be able to show you the resemblance that Lord Earlsfield bears to Nebuchadnezzar and Nero, and Commodus and Hippias, and all the tyrants of antiquity? It would be long enough before *you* could draw a parallel between his lordship and Tarquinius Superbus, like the one which Slasher gave you the other day."

"I don't want any parallel to make me

know that Lord Earlsfield's a brute," said Hanmer, indignantly. "If you had seen the self-sufficient way in which he leaned back in his chair the other day, when we went as a deputation to ask for the course. He folded his hands and crossed his legs, and looked at us as if we were half-a-dozen poachers brought up before him to get three months apiece; and then he began to speak about the injurious influence of the turf upon the morals of the commercial classes, and how it tempted to gambling and fraud. You would have thought that we were all to be in the dock for embezzlement in three months' time according to him."

"He may hold his tongue about that," burst in Tom Cotts, "considering the paragraphs you read in the Society papers about his brother the colonel's goings-on; and the member with all his smoothness and nice speeches is more mixed up with horse-flesh than he would like his lordship to know."

"By Jove, won't we make it hot for the

Honourable George when he next shows his face on the hustings!"

"And make good the adage," remarked Ned, "about the reward which a certain class of quadrupeds bestow upon those who cast pearls before them. If silence is golden, George Colpoys has endowed his constituency richly."

"The sister came home the other day," observed Cotts. "I saw her at the station coming off the 2.40 train. She is ageing visibly. I don't believe she'll ever get married."

"I don't expect she will," commented Ned; "she has always wanted so badly to get a husband."

"I saw her, too, at Bullong," said Charley Hanmer, who was quite aware of the advantages that his two months' Continental experience gave him in Earlsport. "She was there with her maid and courier at the same time as we were. Patronised all the artists in the place, especially those who were good-looking."

"And she would be a deuced good catch for an artist or for anybody else," cried old Colonel Cowrie across the room. "She got all her aunt Lady Pye's money; and her husband, Sir Jasper Pye, had three stars at his name in the Leadenhall Street books, and half-a-dozen indigo factories in Behar to boot. I know for a fact that the whole of the Pye money went to the Honourable Miss Colpoys. I remember old Pye in Calcutta well when he was a judge of the Sudder. He never took a bribe of less than ten thousand rupees in his life;" and the colonel, whose career had never exposed him to such lucrative temptations, subsided into his cigar with a sigh at the recollection of his own slender savings.

"Ah, but it is tied up!" said Mr Mold of Fossebraye & Mold, the lawyers, who, though he did not wish to be considered as one of the *habitués* of Ned Horseley's corner, could not refrain from sometimes putting the young men right from his superior sources of information. "Lady Pye left the interest of her money only to her niece, and even that is conditioned upon her marrying with Lord Earlsfield's sanction. If she marry any one without his lordship's approbation the money falls to him."

"Quite proper," quoth Ned. "Under the same circumstances I should take very good care that my sister did not throw herself away upon any unworthy choice. You may be sure that Lord Earlsfield will exercise great discrimination in choosing a husband for her: the sort of man who would not have any children might have a good chance. And yet, knowing people make mistakes. There was Louis Philippe's little blunder in the Spanish marriage, although the odds were long on his side."

"Yes," said Dr Horniblow; "I believe a marriage could have been arranged between the Honourable Miss Colpoys and Lord Milltimber, the Earl of Elsedale's eldest son. In fact, Lady Elsedale told me as much when I was attending her for bronchitis; but Lord Earlsfield made an objection about his being three years younger, as if that mattered, when they were both in the county, and neighbours as it were. But Lord Earlsfield showed so much opposition and temper that the Elsedales withdrew their son from the negotiations."

"And there was Sir Miles Waring," added Charley Hanmer. "I have heard she was mad about him, but Lord Earlsfield raked up all the stories about his gambling and about women, and swore he would never consent to her wedding such an immoral man. And Miss Colpoys said she would marry him in spite of her brother, and that his lordship might keep her aunt's money; but Sir Miles took fright at that and made off."

"She was sweet, too, on Weatherport, the barrister whom Lord Earlsfield brought down here to conduct the canvass against the Tory candidate at the election before last," said Mr Mold; "I believe he asked my lord's permission to pay his addresses, but got a terrible rebuff for his presumption. They say he'll have the next judgeship."

"Though they made him Lord Chancellor, it would not remove Lord Earlsfield's objection to letting the East India money away from his grasp," replied Ned; "and Miss Colpoys is doomed to virginity as sure as ever was Vestal, unless she falls in with some one bold enough to run away with her for herself, and the chances of that are getting less. But here is George Fossebraye, who is her lawyer, and who can tell you all about her better than any one else."

But upon that, as upon most other subjects relating to his clients, George Fossebraye preserved such a discreet reticence that the talk speedily drifted to other topics.

CHAPTER VIII.

HALF-HOPES.

"And you mean to tell me, my dear, that he has not called on you, or written to you, or done anything?" said Mrs Fossebraye, ticking off the several divisions of her question on her forefinger.

"Why should he?" answered Cloete Sparshott, calmly; "you know all that was over long ago. I don't wish to meet him again, and to have the old stories raked up."

"Why, they will be raked up whether you meet him or not. Every one has been asking me, 'Has he been to see Cloete Sparshott yet?' 'Is he going to marry Cloete now?' And what can I say? I know no more about it than any one else," rejoined Mrs Fossebraye with an injured air.

"You may very safely say 'No' to both questions," said Cloete, in a very decided voice.

"And why, Cloete? Why should you say so? He has come back evidently in good circumstances, and unmarried. I suppose you are angry because he has not been to see you yet. But he will come, Cloete; you mark my words, he will come. I know men well;" and Mrs Fossebraye gave her head a sage shake, as if her knowledge of the male sex were quite encyclopedic.

The Fossebrayes lived in a roomy old house in a quiet and unfashionable quarter of Earlsport, which had once been built for two maiden ladies of the Earlscourt family about the beginning of the eighteenth century, and which the late Mr Fossebraye had acquired from his lordship for a long lease at a nominal rental. The streets round about were poor enough, but the Lodge was shut in by lofty walls and thick shrubberies from all unpleasant associations of the neighbourhood. It was a pleasant old house for those who, like George Fossebraye, could appreciate its homely charms, which were still further engrained in his heart by recollections of childhood and of family love. It was in vain that Mrs Fossebraye contrasted the situation of the Lodge with the superior advantages of Earlsfield Crescent or Colpoys Terrace, where the nerve-centres of Earlsport society were situated. In vain she bewailed the thousand ailments which she was doomed to suffer on account of the confined atmosphere and unwholesome surroundings. Her husband's one strong point of domestic obstinacy was his clinging adherence to the home of his father.

George Fossebraye was a popular man in Earlsport. He was wealthy, had a good position, and was the head of the most reputable legal firm in the town. But these advantages might not have secured him so much goodwill without an alloy of envy, had there not been something in his situation which appealed to their compassion as well as to their respect. "Poor George Fossebraye, what a pity he is not clever!" had been the comment of the town ever since he left school and took a stool in his father's office. Old Mr Fossebraye himself had said so; and Mr Fossebraye's right to judge of cleverness was undeniable, for his abilities alone had raised him from a drudging clerk to the command of the best legal business in the county. The old man was not easy to please with his son's parts; and because he saw none of that ambitious eagerness to grapple with difficulties, and to push himself forward, which had raised himself in the world, he made more of what he considered his son's dulness than was just. "He would never make a lawyer," the old man mourned as he compared George's slowness with the rapidity with which he himself could master a case or write out an opinion; and when he was gone he feared the house of Fossebraye would go down with him. In these ideas he was supported by the testimony of his managing clerk, Mr Mold, who skilfully ran down Mr George's capacity in the same proportion as he magnified the abilities of his principal; and before Mr Fossebraye died, he had clearly made up his mind that the sole way of saving his son from discredit, and his firm from ruin, was by giving George Mr Mold as a mentor and partner in the business. George again gave proof of his dulness by not being able to appreciate this arrangement, but he had always deferred loyally to his father's views; and upon the old man's death the firm began as Fossebraye & Mold. The reason of this arrangement was readily grasped by the Earlsport public. When George Fossebraye gave sound advice, as he generally did, or brought some difficult business to a successful issue, his client regarded him with pleased wonder, and would remark that "George Fossebraye was not, after all, such a dolt as people said." But, notwithstanding, that client would go away with the idea that the acknowledged genius of Mr Mold had something to do with the matter, although the latter had not been concerned at all in the business. Mr Mold received credit, and cheerfully accepted it, for being the mainstay of the house; but slow as George Fossebraye was, the old clients preferred giving their confidence to him rather than to his more brilliant junior partner.

Public opinion regarding George Fossebraye was fully corroborated by the step which he took about a year after his father's death. People were hopeful that as he was at least quiet and prudent, he would marry some sensible woman who might make up for his own deficiencies, and be of assistance to him in this way through the world. Earlsport had no want of young ladies well endowed with mental cleverness, and many mammas would have readily taken George under their wings. But, as all agreed afterwards, it would have been expecting too much of George Fossebraye to profit by such consideration. He fell in love with Magdalen Cathcart, the spoilt child of an old Indian general who had married a relation of Mr Sparshott, the vicar. Magdalen had served to sustain the part of Spartan helot in the homilies of Earlsport mothers. She had been spoiled from her infancy; she was silly and injudicious; she had no control over her temper and less over her tongue; she said the wrong things to the right people, and made matters worse by blundering explanations. It was quite clear now, even if proof had not been needed before, that poor George was not clever, or he would never have picked out such a wife. It was no answer to this argument that Magdalen had the free beauty of a wood-elf, or that the general, her father, had brought a heavy store of Indian rupees back with him to his native town. George Fossebraye was too dull to be supposed to be susceptible to beauty or to be influenced by prudent motives. That most of the other unengaged young men in Earlsport society were also running after Magdalen and the general's money-bags did not palliate George's folly one whit. One wise head cannot be made out of two foolish ones, and old Mr Fossebraye's ominous predictions were gloomily recalled by way of an epithalamium.

The fortunes of George Fossebraye and his wife, however, bore out the old adage, that the unexpected is what always happens. They got on as quietly as if the wisdom of Solomon and Minerva had been combined in the regulation of their household. At least they furnished no food for the gossips, and in Earlsport that spoke volumes for their way of living. People could only express surprise that they managed so well, and ascribed their felicity to a mutual want of judgment. They saw just enough of society to prevent their neighbours from being able to complain that they avoided it, and withal they lived so much by themselves that no one in common conscience could charge Mrs Fossebraye with being gay or extravagant.

As you look at Mrs Fossebraye in a lounge before the fire, in her old-fashioned drawing-room, you will easily account to yourself for George falling in love without needing to have recourse to abstruse psychological speculations. She is fair, with silky fair hair so soft and fine that its plaits and braids scarcely impair the natural curves of her head. She had no colour but the rich cherry rose on her full lips, and the delicate yellow of her long drooping eyelashes. But she has two black eyes which of themselves serve to give animation and expression to her whole face, and through which, rather than through her features, her moods of mind may be read. There was witchery in these eyes which could bend men to their will, and it was no wonder though George was lost when he looked into them. Perhaps it was as well for him that there were lines of weakness and indecision in the rest of the face, which suggested the neutralisation of the strength of which these eyes spoke, although the softer curves heightened rather than marred her beauty.

Cloete Sparshott was standing by the fire, her arm resting upon the mantelpiece, and her side-face turned towards her cousin. She was gazing thoughtfully into the fire, with her colour slightly heightened by the previous conversation. It was the first time Mrs Fossebraye had seen her since Brancepeth's return, and Madge had been all anxiety to learn the news. The flirtation which she had so injudiciously promoted between the two young lovers had been a romantic episode in her somewhat humdrum married life, and now she was eager to get her hand in again.

" You'll see I am right," she repeated, shaking her head positively. " Stephen Brancepeth has come back single. That obstinate old father of his has given in, although he does not like to own it. Stephen will be at your feet again in a fortnight, and in six months you will be mistress of the Dunes House."

" I beg, Madge, you will dismiss the notion. Stephen Brancepeth is nothing to me nor I to him. All that was over with our boyhood and girlhood. He is a man and I am a woman now, and we both know the paths in life we each have to follow."

"Don't be silly," said Mrs Fossebraye, impatiently; "if Stephen Brancepeth is still quite free, he won't be able to keep away from you. Living there in that lonely Dunes House all to himself, and with nothing to do, he is bound to moon about love, and to think about you. Every walk he takes about the place will recall you to him; and if not," added Madge, determinedly, "it will go hard with me if I don't fall upon some way of prodding his memory."

"Madge!" cried Cloete, facing round with a set and serious expression on her face, "if you have any regard for me you will do nothing of the kind. I beg you will never mention Mr Brancepeth's name to me nor mine to him. I have suffered enough from people's talking, when I was too young and silly to have known better. It is hard enough for me to have Mr Brancepeth coming back at all," added the girl, with a quiver in her voice.

"Do you not love him now?"

No answer.

"Do you know that he loves any one else?"

Still Cloete held her peace, though she was controlling herself with a visible effort.

"Then," cried Madge, triumphantly, "there exists no just and lawful impediment why things should not be as they were. Don't interrupt me, Cloete; I know it all. You would not stand between Stephen Brancepeth and his father, and he lost heart when the old man seemed likely to hold out. I never thought Stephen Brancepeth a hero; but he is a right good fellow for all that, and I shall never rest until I have made it up between you."

"Spare your pains, Madge," replied the girl hotly. "I have no wish to meet Mr Stephen Brancepeth again; and if I have to do it, he must be nothing more than a mere acquaintance. I have got my lesson, and have learnt it. Perhaps it has done me good. But at all events *that* folly is over, and I shall never forgive you if you try to involve me by any of your tricks."

"You wilful chit," said Mrs Fossebraye, as Cloete stooped over her to kiss her good-bye, "be thankful that you have wiser heads than your own to think out what is best for you;" and Madge shook her own fair head, as if a monopoly of sagacity was contained therein.

"Don't, Madge," was Cloete's parting words; but out in the street, on her way home to the Museum, Mrs Fossebraye's words fluttered and disquieted her. Stephen Brancepeth had come back, and had given no sign of his presence to her. He himself had thrown her up in the depths of his despair, and he showed no signs of recalling his resolution now that he was evidently once more in prosperity. A feeling of bitterness passed over her mind when she recollected that she had at the first offered to sacrifice herself to save the breach with his father. She could almost hate Stephen Brancepeth at the thought of it; but she loved him still. But she assured herself she would be brave. She had her duty to her father; she had the strange old man of the Museum to devote herself to; and if she wished to marry, Cloete thought, with pardonable pride, that she would find plenty of eligible suitors in Earlsport. She had not been without proofs of this, though her "lesson," as she called it, had made her cold and circumspect beyond her years in intercourse with the young men whom she met at Mrs Fossebraye's, or the vicarage, or the few other houses whither she was in the habit of going. She would be brave, and face this trial to which the return of Stephen Brancepeth threatened to expose her, so firmly that no one —and Stephen himself least of all—should be able to guess the anguish which it cost her. But deep down in her heart there was a consciousness of the frail basis on which these firm resolutions rested — perhaps a hope against hope that it was not yet too late for Stephen himself to come and explain all.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE TOO MANY.

THE lights are not up yet in Mrs Fossebraye's drawing-room, and the firelight shows her to the best advantage in the rich crimson velvet robe which she has judiciously selected to set off her fair charms. Mr Mold leans over the back of a chair fronting her, for he likes to come early on the evenings when the Fossebrayes have a dinner-party. It looks kindly and paternal, and Mr Mold has no objection to Earlsport noting the affectionate solicitude with which he watches over the welfare of his partner and his partner's wife. Mr Mold is not at all ashamed of the charge which old Mr Fossebraye left him, and freely gives his friends to understand how heavily its responsibilities weigh upon him; and so he always makes a point of being the first arrival, that he may assist in receiving the guests like one of the family.

"It is very good of you to come, Mr Mold," says Mrs Fossebraye; "you see, one doesn't quite know whom to ask to meet Mr Stephen Brancepeth, his coming back has been so queer. And then he has shut himself up altogether in the Dunes House, and hasn't called upon any one except George."

"Just so," said Mr Mold, rolling his eyes in the darkness; "quite so; one can't say whom he would like to meet. But of course he will be very glad to find Earlsport society opening its doors to him again; and he could begin in no better place than here."

"That's just it," said Mrs Fossebraye, accepting the compliment. "Mrs Alderman Hanmer was dying to ask him, as she always runs after any one people are talking about. She wanted Charley to leave a card at the Dunes

House, and get a promise from Mr Stephen Brancepeth as soon as possible to come to her Thursday's dance. But he told George that though he couldn't refuse to come to him he was going to live very retired for the present."

"Quite so," said Mr Mold; "he has his reasons. In fact I think it a very sensible thing of him not to go about much just now," he added in an oracular tone, as if these reasons were perfectly patent to him.

"And do tell me, Mr Mold," cried Mrs Fossebraye, raising herself in her chair and looking coaxingly at him from behind her hand fire-screen, "what is all this mystery about Mr Brancepeth's money? George won't tell me a word about it, and he says he will be nasty if ever I ask him about it again."

"And Mr Mold will be nasty too, if you bother him about it," said George, coming in out of the darkness. "Pretty lawyers we should be if we told our clients' secrets to such a chatterbox. We might as well publish them in the 'Mercury.'"

"Ah! then there is a secret," exclaimed Mrs Fossebraye, joyously, and shaking her head sagely. "I knew there was; and why shouldn't I be told it? I never tell anything. It is a shame to treat me like a child. Is it not, Mr Mold?" Mr Mold's eyes again rolled inwards and he shook his head, but whether he might be understood to deprecate this want of confidence on the side of his partner, or Mrs Fossebraye's capacity for keeping counsel, was not further expressed.

"Did you have a note from Ned Horseley this afternoon, Madge?" asked George, turning his back to the fire with so manifest an intention to take the good of it that Mr Mold felt compelled to cede his position on the hearth-rug and take a chair immediately behind Mrs Fossebraye's elbow. "I met him at the club a little ago, and he said he had to go to Beechborough by the mail. We shall be thirteen at dinner."

"Oh, that is all right!" replied his wife. "Mr Horseley sent his apologies in the forenoon, and as I was driving through Earlsfield Square I ran up-stairs to the Museum and asked Cloete Sparshott to come."

"Madge!" ejaculated George, in a tone of deep distress. "How on earth could you do such a thing? And after what I said to you, too. How could you be so imprudent as to ask Miss Sparshott?"

"Whom else could I ask on such short notice?" returned Mrs Fossebraye, innocently. "I don't think of standing on ceremony with dear Cloete. And what else could I do, Mr Mold?"

"You know that I pointed out to you how imprudent it would be," cried George, walking about the room impatiently; "you know quite well how people talked about Brancepeth and Cloete before he went away. If you have no regard for Brancepeth's feelings, you should have some for your own cousin. It will just set people gossiping again."

"But, dear George, do you not always tell me never to mind how people talk? I am sure they talk enough about us living here all by ourselves, in this horrid old place; and don't you always tell me never to mind what they say? Doesn't he now, Mr Mold?"

"Confound it!" cried George peevishly, "I wish you would make an effort to talk sense for five minutes for once in your life. I took particular care that no one was to be asked to dinner who would in any way embarrass Brancepeth by old associations. And here you have asked Miss Sparshott of all others. The bare fact of their meeting here will make people rake up the old story again. I wish I had given Brancepeth a bachelor dinner at the club. I am surprised that Miss Sparshott's own good sense did not tell her that she ought not to have accepted an invitation to meet Brancepeth so soon. I always thought she had more judgment."

"She didn't know," cried Mrs Fossebraye, producing her pocket-handkerchief, and making unmistakable preparations for tears. "I didn't tell her who were coming; and it is very cruel of you to abuse poor Cloete, who is so poor and has so few to be kind to her, and all because she is my cousin" (sob, sob, sob). "Is it not cruel, Mr Mold?" Mr Mold's eyes rolled more wildly in his head than ever, but he made no answer.

"I am not abusing Cloete," said George, doggedly. "I am not abusing anybody. It is because I have so much regard for Cloete that I would not have people given occasion to talk about her by bringing her here to meet Brancepeth. It is intensely annoying" —here a loud double knock came to the front door, arresting Mr Fossebraye in his angry walk through the room.

"I am going to have hysterics—I feel them coming," sobbed Mrs Fossebraye, settling herself on her chair in a proper attitude for a faint. "How could you, George, be so cruel when you know I am so nervous? Get me my vinaigrette, please do, Mr Mold."

"Don't, Madge, don't be a goose!" cried George in terror. "What will people think?

I don't mind Cloete's coming a bit. We will make the best of it. Pull yourself together, there is a dear. The Hanmers are coming up-stairs," and while Mr Mold's back was seasonably turned, looking for the vinaigrette, George stooped down and kissed his wife. The hysterical tendency promptly vanished, and in another instant Mrs Fossebraye was all smiles, to receive the salutations of Mr and Mrs Alderman Hanmer.

CHAPTER X.

MRS FOSSEBRAYE'S DINNER-PARTY.

In our litany for social salvation there ought certainly to be a petition for deliverance from dinner-parties with a purpose. We have become aroused to the danger of novels "with a purpose," and have learnt to discriminate and avoid them accordingly, unless the purpose happen to be our own purpose. Unfortunately, we have not such general landmarks to guide us in the case of invitations to dinner, and have therefore the more need to refer our ways to the divinities that regulate the unseen. Mr A asks you to dinner, and before the fish has been removed you are made to feel that the entertainment has been arranged in order that Mr

B may become acquainted with Mr C; or that the long-standing differences between Mr D and Mr E may be arranged; or that the foundation of a future match may be laid between the impecunious Mr F and the young and wealthy widow G. You find out this, we say, and become conscious of the fact that you have been asked there to occupy a chair, and handle a knife and fork—to assist at a function, in fact—and to carry on just as much conversation as will make sufficient by-play to cover the proper object of the party. But when such a feeling pervades a dinner-table, the gathering can seldom be a general success, however satisfactorily the business of the *petit comité* may have been arranged; and you go away with sensations very much the same as if the claret had been corked, or the *ragouts* had had a relish of garlic in them.

It must be owned that the Fossebrayes' dinner-party was arranged with a sinister intention of this sort; but the guilt attached itself mainly to the husband. It was George who had suggested the dinner, and who selected the guests, and who had overruled all his wife's recommendations that seemed to him incompatible with the object he had in view. Brancepeth, he had told her, desired for the present to live in retirement; but he also wished it to be seen that he was not afraid to show himself in Earlsport society; and so George Fossebraye had endeavoured to get together a few representative people of the place, whose opinions would be likely to have influence in checking the gossip and curiosity that his friend's return had excited; and he had carefully avoided asking all those whose previous intimacy with the banker's son might give them an excuse for fastening themselves upon him afterwards. He thought he had succeeded in arranging this to perfection. And now, at the end, his wife had invited that unlucky Cloete Sparshott, whom of all others it would be most awkward for Brancepeth to meet.

First came Mr and Mrs Alderman Hanmer,—the Alderman tall, thin, and dignified-looking;

his wife stout and florid, vulgar and good-natured. The Alderman professed to despise the parish politics of Earlsport, and deplored the fate which associated him at the council board with men who were innocent of "h's," and unconscious of the concord which should subsist between nominatives and their verbs; but he was at heart fully sensible of the advantages of his municipal dignity, and quite content to bear the weight of the mayor's chain when the time came for him to assume it. As for Mrs Hanmer, she would rather have seen her husband Mayor of Earlsport than Prime Minister of Great Britain. She comprehended the advantages she would derive from the former dignity, and had very hazy conceptions about what was implied in the latter.

"Mr and Mrs Challoner." Mr Challoner is a solicitor with a practice very inferior to that of Messrs Fossebraye & Mold; but his wife is rich, and they go much into the society of the place, where Mrs Challoner has a good deal to say for herself and about others as well. George is on friendly terms with Challoner, as a man in the same profession of whom he has no need to be jealous; but it was probably Mrs Challoner's opinion that he has had some end in view in asking them to dinner.

"The Rev. Mr Eastwicke," "Colonel and Mrs Ogle and Miss Ogle," followed in rapid succession. Of Mr Eastwicke it need only be said that he was the incumbent of St Swithin's, a newly built and fashionable church of high tendencies, which scandalised sound Protestants and attracted a large congregation of ladies, and which also was the chosen place of worship of the Fossebrayes, George thinking that religion was a matter in which wives ought to have their own way, although he was not very enthusiastic about principles, and not very inquisitive about the purposes to which his liberal subscriptions were applied.

The Ogles were a family of the highest standing in Earlsport. They visited at Elsedale Castle on the rare occasions when the

Earl was there; they dined at the Court on the still rarer occasions when Lord Earlsfield was inclined to show hospitality to his neighbours; but for all this they were not too proud to mix with the townspeople, and take their share of a good dinner when they could honestly come by it. They were asked everywhere and went everywhere; and George Fossebraye felt that it would be half the battle for his friend to have the Ogles' good word on his side.

"Miss Sparshott." Cloete made her appearance looking rather flushed and startled at the appearance of company for whose presence she had not been prepared, but with a maidenly dignity that held its own for her wherever she went. Her dress was a simple gown, and so different in appearance from the robes of Mrs Challoner or Mrs Fossebraye that even one who was not a connoisseur might safely have concluded that it must be old-fashioned; but her graceful carriage and fresh beauty were sufficiently striking to keep men's thoughts from straying to her costume, whatever might be its effect upon the ladies.

Mrs Fossebraye kissed her cousin, and George hastened to show that he retained no remembrance of his late disappointment, as he seated Cloete between his wife and Mr Mold.

"You'll take Miss Sparshott down to dinner, Mold," he whispered, and Mr Mold assented, well pleased, for he liked pretty women, and had always signified his special admiration of Cloete by violent visual distortions whenever he encountered her. It had more than once occurred to Mr Mold that Cloete might without much difficulty be converted into Mrs Mold. She was so poor that she could not afford to be particular; and various business transactions which had taken place between himself and the doctor gave him, he considered, a right to count upon the latter's influence on his behalf.

But the guest of the evening was yet to arrive, and all except poor innocent Cloete felt the awkwardness of expectation. "There is every appearance of an early summer," said Colonel Ogle to Mrs Fossebraye, by way of breaking silence, although he had already made the same remark twice since he entered the room.

"We expect Mr Stephen Brancepeth to-night," said George in a low tone to Cloete, thinking that it would not be altogether kind or prudent to allow her to be taken aback by that gentleman's entrance. No third party heard the warning, for Mr Mold was just then telling Mr Challoner how wrong the county court judge had been in the case of the Hundred of Clifton against Wrigham, and how indefeasible in his, Mr Mold's, opinion had been the case which Mr Challoner had made out on behalf of the Hundred.

"What's that you are saying about Clifton and Wrigham?" broke in Mr Fossebraye in a much louder tone than was at all necessary; but the interruption had the effect which he intended, and drew the eyes of the company from Cloete to Messrs Challoner and Mold, and while they were endeavouring to discover if there was any point of general interest in the controversy of Clifton and Wrigham, Stephen Brancepeth walked into the room.

It came all so sudden that Cloete had scarcely time to think of the embarrassment which she felt ought to belong to her position. Old recollections crowded upon her with bewildering rapidity, and struggled with her endeavours to think only of the present and what lay before her. Old times came back to her, old meetings and partings rose up thick and fast in her memory; the remembrance of old love—love that had never died out—strove hard to get the mastery over her. And over all lay the great shadow of their last despairing farewell, the words of which now seemed to ring in her ears—"I may never be able to marry you, Cloete, but I shall never be able to forget you." He was in the room; he had seen her; of so much she was conscious; and she could hear his voice speaking to their hostess. He was making mere commonplace replies to Mrs Fossebraye's welcome back to Earlsport, but to Cloete it seemed that he was saying to her ear alone, "I may never be able to marry you, Cloete, but I shall never be able to forget you." Her head swam, and she looked wildly round her, until she caught Mrs Alderman Hanmer's eye fixed searchingly upon her, and then she became herself. Weak as she felt, she was determined no one should see it. The ladies of Earlsport should never have grounds for saying that she could not keep her feelings from showing themselves before them. She turned round, and with a firmly set face, and her fan clenched in her hand, began to talk to Mr Mold upon indifferent subjects of conversation.

There was no one now to wait for but Miss Cathcart, who was always late, and whose arrival the butler had been instructed to regard as a safe signal for the announcement of dinner. Miss Cathcart was Madge Fossebraye's aunt, but not so many years older as to feel sufficient pride in this relationship.

She was nearer forty than thirty, but she was fair, full, and sleek, and looked well under her age. That Miss Cathcart would marry some day was always considered to be within the bounds of possibility; and she was held in high estimation among those gentlemen of Earlsport and the neighbourhood who had lost their wives, or those who, having worn the edge off the pleasures of bachelor life, were looking forward with resignation to making themselves *rangés*. Squire Horseley even had been heard to declare that he only waited for the time when a crown-piece would no longer cover his baldness as a warning that he must marry her himself. She was, however, incurably deaf, and, as Mrs Fossebraye said, no gentleman would dare to make love to her within a quarter of a mile of a human habitation.

"I ought to have gone to sit with old Mrs Colepepper, my dear," she said to Mrs Fossebraye in an aside intended to be a whisper, but which was distinctly audible to every one in the room; "but I was dying to see Mr

Brancepeth, of whom we have all been talking so much. And you have got Cloete here too. So considerate."

The gentleman in question was just then saying that he was very glad to meet Miss Sparshott again, and that he trusted the Doctor was quite well. He was very well, Cloete had replied; but it seemed to her as if Brancepeth had again repeated the haunting words, "I may never be able to marry you, Cloete, but I shall never be able to forget you."

At dinner Cloete found herself between Mr Mold and Mr Eastwicke, while Mr Brancepeth was away at the other end of the table flanked by the hostess and Miss Ogle. George Fossebraye had no great conversational gifts, but he did his best to make general talk circulate round the table. He discussed the county news with Colonel Ogle, and joined the Alderman in his grumbles against the majority in the Town Council. There was always one safe subject at an Earlsport dinner-table, and that was the conduct of Lord Earlsfield towards the town, and the shortcomings of his brother, the borough member. Messrs Fossebraye & Mold were his lordship's solicitors, and George generally felt bound to stand up for his client; but as a citizen of Earlsport, he could not help having a feeling with the general grievance.

"He won't have the ghost of a chance," put in Alderman Hanmer decisively. "If no one else comes forward, the very stones in the streets would rise to oppose George Colpoys's return for the borough. We are not to be held down and snubbed by my lord, and keep his brother in Parliament too."

"But you won't split up the party?" said Fossebraye; "if you run another, you will only open the door for a Conservative. You can't expect that Mr Colpoys will withdraw, even if Lord Earlsfield would allow him."

"I'd rather have a Conservative ten times over—yes, the rankest Tory among them—than have the town crushed under Earlscourt in this fashion."

"Delighted to hear you say so, Alderman," cried Mr Challoner, who was the Conservative agent for Earlsport, but whose post had hitherto been very much a sinecure; "we shall put you on our next committee. I'll book you as chairman."

"Bah!" retorted the Alderman; "you'll never get the length of a committee. A Tory has no chance in Earlsport. You won't get any one to stand who knows the town."

"A chance for you, colonel," said George; "do you feel inclined to back your principles, and aid Alderman Hanmer in freeing the borough from what he calls the yoke of Earlscourt?"

"Gad, I wish I had the money to do it!" returned Colonel Ogle; "there is nothing I would like better than to get into Parliament. There are those fellows who collared the Banda and Kirwee prize-money—I should make it hot for them. There was the last divisional command, too—a fellow who had spent all his time between Knightsbridge and Windsor—I should like to have a shot at that. I spoke about it to Colpoys, and asked him to lay the facts before the House, and point out what a job it was. And he coolly told me that he could not do it on principle, as all the time he had been in Parliament he had been on the outlook for a job for himself."

"Have you met Miss Colpoys, Mr Brancepeth?" asked Miss Ogle; "she resides a good deal abroad."

"Yes; I have met Miss Colpoys," replied Brancepeth, shortly.

"She is very nice; the nicest of all the Earlsfield family," continued Miss Ogle. "She is so good-natured, and so anxious to make every one happy. Quite romantic she is, and so unlike all the others. She is at Earlscourt just now."

"Yes," said Mr Mold across the table; "she came the day after Mr Brancepeth."

"Indeed!" said Brancepeth; "where is Lord Earlsfield's son now, Mrs Fossebraye?"

"He is in London with his keeper—well, then, his tutor—his companion—whatever you like to call him, George," replied Mrs Fossebraye, as she saw her husband's eyes directed towards her; "but George told me the other day that he is coming home too. Every one is coming home since Mr Brancepeth set them the good example."

"It is very sad," remarked Mrs Challoner; "a proud man like Lord Earlsfield must feel his son's infirmity very much; and yet they say Harold Colpoys is sane enough at times, and very clever. He will succeed his father all the same, will he not, Mr Mold?"

"Certainly," said Mr Mold, pleased at being referred to on so abstruse a point of peerage law; "in the title at all events. Madness is no bar to inheritance. He may even marry and transmit the title to a saner descendant. Would you like to be a peeress, Miss Sparshott?"

"My ambition is not so aspiring," replied Cloete, and then she bent her head over her plate, as she felt that Brancepeth might apply her words to himself, and was probably looking at her; and that all the rest of the company were very likely thinking the same.

"Isn't it very hard on Miss Colpoys that she cannot marry?" asked Miss Ogle of her neighbour. "She is so very amiable, and she can't marry without Lord Earlsfield's consent; and they say that he won't let her marry any one, because if she does her fortune will go out of the family, and if she marries against his will, it all falls to him."

"I believe Lord Earlsfield is a very sensible man, and he can surely be trusted to do what is best for his sister's happiness," returned Brancepeth, slowly. "Does Miss Donne still live at the Court, Mrs Fossebraye?"

"Oh yes, she is still there. She always will be there, although I don't know why she should go on living in that wretchedly gloomy place unless Lord Earlsfield himself is going to marry her."

"Because she has nowhere else to live," broke in Colonel Ogle, warmly. "Colonel Donne—I knew him well, good officer and good man he was—never had a knack of saving money, and could scarcely have been worth a rap when he died. He was a friend of Lord Earlsfield—a distant relation, too, I believe. When I hear them all abusing Lord Earlsfield, I can never forget that he has given that orphan girl a home. It shows that, with all his pride and stiffness, there must be some kindness at the bottom of his heart. I can't stand his arrogance, and have never allowed him to come the major-general over me, but I respect him for what he has done for that girl."

"Miss Donne is a very charming young lady," said Mr Eastwicke in his slow intoning voice, "with none of Lord Earlsfield's narrow views. She was at St Swithin's last Sunday. I observed her in your seat, Mrs Fossebraye."

"We were not at church," said the hostess; "when one has been very good all Advent and Lent, one has the feeling that one can take it out in the Sundays after Trinity."

Mr Eastwicke looked doubtful at this doctrine, but prudently reflecting that Mrs Fossebraye was St Swithin's most liberal benefactor, and that his church was not yet endowed, he recognised the inexpediency of giving an ecclesiastical turn to the conversation of a mixed company.

When the ladies had withdrawn, the gentlemen did not close up, and general conversation gave way to detached talk. George Fossebraye and the Alderman discussed the shortcomings of the council and the last act of imbecility on the part of the mayor. Messrs Challoner and Mold exchanged more opinions on some recent decisions of the county court judge, and were in cordial agreement as to that functionary's utter ignorance of the most elementary principles of common law. Mr Eastwicke endeavoured to interest Colonel Ogle in the iniquitous prosecution which had been instituted, under the Public Worship Regulation Act, against the rector of St Cuthbert's in Muddleham, but found that

that obtuse officer, although a menber of his own congregation, persisted in holding that obedience was the first duty of a parson as well as of a soldier. While his interlocutor was thinking how least offensively he could point out the grave difference between ecclesiastical and military obligations, the colonel turned away to Brancepeth, who was abstractedly sipping his claret, heedless of the talk that was going on around him.

"You were very lucky to fall upon such a comfortable nest as the Dunes House, Mr Brancepeth, on your return. I was often there in your predecessor's time, poor Sir Alexander M'Chanter, a very worthy and sensible man—for a Scotsman. It used to recall my old West Indian days to taste his sangaree and pepper-pots. Were you lucky enough to get his cellar? I had hopes that it might have come to the hammer, when a poor man might have been able to pick up a few bottles of his old Madeira."

"I took over Sir Alexander's cellar," returned Brancepeth; "but," and he spoke very slowly and distinctly, "I fear I shall not be able to turn it to as hospitable an account as my predecessor did, for some time at least. I took the Dunes House with the view of leading a retired life for the present, although my old friend Fossebraye has been kind enough to give me an excellent excuse for quitting my solitude for one night."

A statement so evidently intended to catch the ears of the company broke off conversation, and an awkward pause ensued. George Fossebraye fingered his napkin nervously, and looked round for indications of a disposition to move up-stairs; while Mr Mold, who had already several times sent the wine past himself, now filled a glass of claret and prepared himself to hear with attention any further announcement of Mr Brancepeth's plans that might transpire.

"You'll very soon get tired of playing hermit," said the colonel, finishing his wine and pushing back his chair. "When these old fellows used to try that game, the devil always was at them in the shape of a woman. Wasn't that the way he tempted St Anthony, Mr Eastwicke?—no, I believe it was a pig that tempted him; but some of the rest of them—eh, Mr Eastwicke, you know all about it?—came to grief when the Old Chap tempted them in the shape of a beautiful woman. I shall live in hopes of drinking Mrs Brancepeth's health at the Dunes House in some of my old friend M'Chanter's forty-five before my beard gets much greyer."

"With Mrs Brancepeth's assistance, I shall try my best to do the honours," said Mr Brancepeth, laughing, as the gentlemen rose and moved up to the drawing-room. Here Mrs Fossebraye had arranged her forces according to her own special views of the objects of the campaign. She had placed Miss Ogle at the piano, and had started a current scandal which would find work for Mrs Hanmer and Mrs Challoner for the rest of the evening. Mrs Ogle she took in hand herself, and Cloete was posted with a book of photographs on a capacious and inviting ottoman in a corner. But Mrs Fossebraye was disappointed if she expected that Brancepeth would be tempted to occupy the vacant seat. He sat down by Mrs Ogle, and complimented her on her daughter's singing, but never by any chance allowed his eyes to stray in the direction where Cloete Sparshott was seated. Mr Eastwicke, however, took possession of the vacant place on the ottoman, while Mr Mold looked over her shoulder; so Cloete was not by any means left out in the cold.

"Can we give you a lift, Mr Brancepeth?" asked Mrs Challoner; "we go your way as far as the corner of the Beechborough Road; or we can take you home for that matter. Our horses want exercise."

"No, thank you," said Brancepeth; "I am walking, and the night is fine. There is a footpath through the Dunes that will take me home in no time."

"Cloete, dear," said Mrs Fossebraye, when all had gone except Mr Mold and Brancepeth, "don't go just yet; George will go home with you. No, thank you, Mr Mold, you need not proffer your services. I'm not going to have Miss Sparshott escorted home so late by bachelors."

Brancepeth heard his hostess's remarks as if he had not heard them, and presently took his leave. "Good night, Mr Brancepeth," said Mrs Fossebraye, with chilling civility; "we *are* so glad to see you back again, and *as* you are going to throw over *all* your old friends, it is *so* very kind of you to make an exception in our favour."

Brancepeth was too much occupied with his own feelings to take notice of the "intention" in Mrs Fossebraye's words. George accompanied him to the door.

"Good night, old fellow," said the latter; "I am afraid you have been very much bored. But yet it is better that you should see some people, just to show that you have not become a wild man of the woods. It will give a new turn to their talk about you."

"I daresay they will discover enough to talk about sooner or later," replied Brancepeth, gloomily. "As you have more than half guessed if you don't altogether know, there will be a pretty hubbub about me sooner or later. It seems to be my doom to find food for the venomous tongues of this slandering town. That poor child, too —I durst not let my eyes fall upon her to-night."

"No, Stephen," said Fossebraye, earnestly; "do not get into her way. I was furious with Madge for bringing her here to-night. I trust your honour as my own; but for her sake, poor thing, avoid her—perhaps for your own peace."

Brancepeth groaned. "Give me a cigar, George, and I'll go home. I thought that was all over—that I had entirely mastered myself—but to-night. It is like a cancer, George; you think the whole thing is cut out, and there is a speck of a root too small for any microscope to show left, and the first favourable condition at once brings the germ to maturity."

"God help you, Brancepeth, but I know you will do what is right," said George, wringing his hand; and Stephen strode forth into the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

MIDNIGHT REFLECTIONS.

Brancepeth walked slowly up the street from George Fossebraye's door, his mind confused with a mixture of feelings which it would have been difficult to have analysed. Fossebraye's words had only emphasised a danger which had been ever present with him since his return to his native town. He had nerved himself to face it, if need were, but he had also told himself that it was one rather to be avoided than encountered. Hitherto he had been selfish enough to think only of himself; but now, George had brought painfully home to him that there was another who had to be considered.

"Ay, and another still," muttered Brancepeth to himself. The thought that, though now his dream of Cloete Sparshott was a thing of the past, a link of that past still held to connect them together; that his return to Earlsport was an influence upon her; that she must still think—if only something—about him, and was probably trying to explain his conduct at that very instant; and that it depended upon his own bearing whether the old love might not be revived,—these thoughts, though Brancepeth mentally condemned them as wicked, were not without a certain pleasantness which ever springs from a consciousness of power. Brancepeth was not by any means a moral hero, nor was he quite free from either vanity or selfishness; but, as he had assured himself, he was an honourable man. He stopped suddenly with a stamp of his foot on the dark pavement, relit his cigar, which he had allowed to go out, and resumed his walk.

How familiar the road was to him, and

how it brought back recollections of hurried scampers, when he and George Fossebraye, in their boyhood, had been spending evenings on the Dunes, or in scrambling among the cliffs still farther beyond! He turned into Earlsfield Square, the normal gloom of which was lit up by only a few lamps, for the frugal corporation had seized upon the excuse of a wan, watery-looking moon, now struggling through great masses of dark cloud, as a pretext for dispensing with half the usual supply of lights. There, before him, in the middle of the square, was the statue of the Great Lord Earlsfield, as all Earlsport and Earlscourt called him, pointing a finger of reproof—perhaps at the ghost of some political opponent who, when in the flesh, had called the attention of the House to some of his lordship's contracts. And here was the banking-house of Brancepeth Brothers, dingier and more dismal than even by daylight, with its windows shuttered and barred. Stephen paused for one instant and looked up a narrow lane between Brancepeth Brothers' bank and the stately offices of the Metropolitan and Rural. A ray of light came from an old house standing in a large garden. That was the window of his father's study, and Brancepeth could picture to himself the scene inside as clearly as if he actually beheld it. The table piled with papers, deeds, and securities; neatly docketed letters, prospectuses, and share-lists; a pile of newspapers on the floor; and his father himself in his easy-chair, leaning back, holding a pen mechanically in his hand, and his eyes thoughtfully fixed on the ceiling. When a boy, Stephen had been wont to wonder what his father could always find to think about, so little did he say, and so engrossed was he with his own thoughts. Did his mother's portrait still hang there? Brancepeth remembered how, when a very young boy, he had been hurriedly brought from Rugby by train, and driven home at a gallop in a cab from the station to see his mother die; and how cruel he had felt it to be, that his father could not leave the bank, where he had an important meeting with the directors of some company of some kind, to kneel by the bedside while she was drawing her latest breath. Did his father ever think of her now when his eyes chanced to catch her portrait? Did he ever think of the son who had solemnly been commended to his love by that dying mother? Other and more angry recollections flashed across Brancepeth's mind, and he turned away and resumed his walk, quitting the town and passing under the dark shades of the trees, whose long branches hung over the tall walls of Lord Earlsfield's park.

When he came to the corner where the Earlscourt grounds skirted the Dunes, he took a footpath through the thin weather-beaten grass and ling, which, with here and there thickets of gorse, covered the stretch of sandhills which the sea had washed in to fill up what doubtless had been a bay in prehistoric days, long before the dragon ship of the Jarl had ever sighted the mouth of the Else. Away across the billowy undulations of the Dunes he could discern in the darkness the long white rollers that came dashing in from the German Ocean, breaking with foamy edge upon the sands. Away to the right the two lights at the entrance of the harbour sparkled upon the water; but the darkness was otherwise unbroken save by a faint red gleam that twinkled like a star. This was the light on Muddleham Point, many miles down the coast. In the centre of the Dunes lay a hollow, sheltered from the sea and screened from the land by the sandhills, which hemmed it round, and which, planted on their inner side by thick shrubberies of pine and fir, showed a dark mass against the grey surface of the Dunes. In the centre of this little wood stood the Dunes House, and in that direction Brancepeth now picked his way over the benty grass, alternated with beds of shingly sand.

The Dunes House at midnight did not look like the abode which a young man full of life and hope would select for choice, however congenial a habitation it might have been for a time-and-travel worn veteran like Sir Alexander M'Chanter. Perhaps this idea struck Brancepeth as he came up to the little side wicket which admitted him into the grounds. He had told his servant not to sit up for him, and let himself in with his key through a small conservatory which led into the library. Here his reading-lamp was lit and turned down low, and a cheerful fire was burning in the grate. But Brancepeth, still restless, turned away to the window, and pulling aside the curtains, stood gazing out at the dark pine-covered slopes before him, and the broken clouds which were drifting away inland before a fresh breeze from the sea.

"What must she have thought of me?" he mused to himself. "How she must have despised me! And yet, if she only knew all, I believe she would not blame me. Would she pity me? That would be even worse. Had I imagined she would be there, I should certainly have avoided the Fossebrayes' dinner. And yet, perhaps it was better that we should meet thus—certainly better for her that she should know at once that the past is buried, and that our old love can never be revived. Revived! I felt to-night that I loved her more than ever, when my love is a sin for me and an insult to her. God help us both! I wonder if she thought to-night of the old days when we strolled together by the Else, or met in the Earlscourt woods, and of the dreams of happiness she used to dream before we were parted. She seemed quite calm and self-possessed. I hope she has forgotten; and yet I cannot bear to think that she has ceased to love me. All selfishness—more of that selfishness which has made my life what it is, and what it will have to be—that and my father together. How different all might have been for me, and for Cloete too, if he had only done me common justice, not to say shown me the reasonable indulgence an only son has a right to look for! But I must avoid Cloete. I owe it to my own honour; I owe it to others. Let people say what they please about me. They may call me selfish, or foolish, or a schemer, if they choose, when all comes out, but they shall have no excuse for tainting my conduct with the shadow of disgrace. If I have made my bed, I can lie on it."

He closed the curtains, and coming round to the table turned up his reading-lamp. Close by it was a letter which Pont, his man, had evidently placed there so that it might attract his notice. Stephen started when he saw the address, and stood a minute before he took it up—anger, perturbation, and curiosity contending for mastery on his countenance. At last he took up the note, and with a bitter smile, and a muttered "Too late," sat down in his chair and leisurely opened the envelope. This was what he read :—

The Earlsport Bank
(Brancepeth Brothers),
28*th April* 18—.

Dear Sir,—If you could make it convenient to call here and favour me with a few minutes' private conversation on an early date, I should feel obliged. I may add, to prevent misapprehension, that it is on a matter of business which I desire to see you, or, to speak more accurately, in the hope that our conversation may lead to a business understanding.—I am, dear sir, your obedient faithful servant, Stephen Brancepeth.

To Stephen Brancepeth, jr., Esq.

Stephen read and re-read the letter with puzzled wonder. It was very different from the communication he had expected. He had calculated upon his reappearance at Earlsport under such unexpected circumstances rousing his father's curiosity. He knew the old man's unyielding nature, and he had fully expected that he would make some move against him. He had thought of old Mr Brancepeth's affection for the bank, and he had thought it possible that he might endeavour to get his son to patch up a peace and carry on the family business. Stephen had even promised himself his revenge in a haughty refusal to have anything to do with the bank or his father either. He had also thought it possible that the banker might insist upon knowing whether he still persisted in his resolution to marry Cloete Sparshott, and he had resolved to return no reply to such a question. But the tenor of this letter was quite inexplicable and unexpected to him, and he did not know what it might or might not foreshadow. The letter was a perfectly civil one—such as any one might naturally receive from one's banker. Stephen had a considerable balance lying at Brancepeth Brothers. Very probably his father, who took an interest in all his customers, might simply wish to give him some advice or hint about investment. At all events, something would probably crop up during the interview to indicate how the land lay between them. Curiosity, if no deeper feeling, mastered his first impulse to send a stiff note declining a meeting. He would send a formal reply, promising to call in a few days; and with this resolve he went to bed, his mind excited by past recollections, and prospects of future complications, which did not afford much promise of a night's tranquil rest.

CHAPTER XII.

THE AUTOCRAT OF THE BREAKFAST-TABLE.

No one ever thought of sitting down to breakfast at Earlscourt until his lordship had made his appearance; and punctilious as the arrangement was, it had this for its justification, that he was never late. Invariably as the clock struck nine, Lord Earlsfield came into the dining-room, and after tapping an old-fashioned barometer that hung by the window, sat down at table with a muttered remark that was believed to be a collective and inclusive greeting to the members of his family. No encouragement was afforded to breakfasting in bedrooms at the Court, even on the coldest mornings. Lord Earlsfield held such Sybaritic practices in special detestation, and took mental note of any who were absentees from the table. On the rare occasions when a temporary affluence afforded George Colpoys a brief independence of his brother's good graces, the member would sometimes venture to breakfast in his own room on the plea that he had Blue-books to master during his meal. Miss Colpoys, too, who was her own mistress since she had come into her aunt's legacy, not infrequently insisted on having breakfast taken up to her; and in her case his lordship was content to waive his undoubted right of objection. Lady Pye's money had placed Dorothy in a manner *in potestate suâ*, and so long as its ultimate destination was kept safe in view, Lord Earlsfield felt that his sister ought to be allowed to enjoy the usufruct of it to her own liking.

On the morning after Mrs Fossebraye's dinner-party, the whole family was assembled by nine o'clock in the breakfast-room to await Lord Earlsfield. George had received a summons to an interview with his lordship in the library that morning, and had come down with grave misgivings as to its object, although, tax his mind as he might, he could recall none of his recent shortcomings more specially heinous than the others, to call for his brother's reprehension. He stood in the window talking in a low voice to Mary Donne, who had come in from the lawn fresh and bright, in a white fleecy dress, with the last spring snowdrop in her bosom. Dorothy was reading her letters, and Mrs Firebrace, who was following up the "call" that she had received after her husband's death and her own retirement from society, was intently conning the pages of 'Every Day a Portion,' which she hurriedly slipped into her pocket as her eldest brother entered the room.

Lord Earlsfield appeared to be in unusually good spirits, and gracious to every one. He gave a smiling "Good morning" to Mary

Donne, nodded to George, and bowed to his sisters. The member for Earlsport, anxiously accustomed to read the signs of the times, thought he saw in his brother's face tokens of fair weather, and straight resolved to seize the passing glimpse of sunshine for haymaking —in other words, to unbosom himself in the coming audience of some of his pecuniary difficulties, and if possible extract some ready money out of the head of the family.

My lord sat down, as did every one else, and reverentially said grace with bent head and closed eyes. Recovering himself, he, according to custom, frowned severely upon the footman standing opposite, as though to impress upon that menial that though Lord Earlsfield rendered due homage to Providence, it was without prejudice to all his other rights and dignities. Probably there was a feeling of the same sort mixed up with all Lord Earlsfield's observances of religion. When he went to church—and he went with exemplary regularity every Sunday—he had a notion that he was not only doing his duty like more humble worshippers, but that his presence was also an attention which could not fail to be well received above, and that recording angels would prick off with more satisfaction his attendance in the Earlscourt pew than that of, say, Dutton, his steward, or even municipal magnates like Alderman Hanmer, or Loxdale the mayor. Not that Lord Earlsfield was above going down on his knees and owning himself sonorously to be a miserable sinner in the midst of the congregation, but he could not help feeling that the admission must come with a very good grace from a man in his position.

The meals at Earlscourt were not cheerful. If the head of the house felt inclined to converse, the others talked in a mild way; if he held his peace, they also ate their food in silence. Lord Earlsfield was so much the master that even his brother or sisters felt his presence a restraint, and when they conversed together it was in the low subdued tones which people employ in the presence of a superior. His lordship was not without sensitive feelings, and the reserve which the others maintained before him was not calculated to increase his comfort; but it had been once established, and he was too shy to break through the custom when it was so much easier to take silent refuge in his dignity.

"You must feel the cold here, Dora," he said, after he had got half-way through his breakfast. "I daresay it must have been milder where you came from last. Where was it?—Biarritz, was it not?"

"No, from St Sever."

"St Sever! Isn't that a rather out-of-the-way place? I can't understand what takes you always to these remote corners. Any English there besides yourself?"

"No, I believe there were not," replied Miss Colpoys. "I always avoid English winter visitors and their ailments, unless I know something of them at home."

"Did you see anything of Brancepeth, the banker's son, in your travels?" put in George Colpoys. "He has come home and taken the Dunes House, and Fossebraye told me he had come over direct from St Sever. I suppose his father and he have made up matters, since he is able to set up for himself. I think I shall call on him some day soon."

"I believe I crossed with him on the packet," answered Dorothy. "I think—yes, I am certain, now you mention it—I noticed the name of Brancepeth on some luggage."

"Did you have a good passage over?" inquired Lord Earlsfield. "If you had waited another week or two you might have got Harold to take care of you."

This was the first formal announcement of the return of the heir-apparent which had been vouchsafed to the Earlscourt family, though various straws had shown them that the wind was set in that direction. An uncomfortable feeling pervaded the table.

Mrs Firebrace swallowed a cupful of hot tea so hastily as to run some risk of choking, while George began vigorously to butter toast. Each felt that Lord Earlsfield's eyes were upon him or her, and each trembled lest his or her face might betray some indication of the general uneasiness.

"Give me another egg—a fresh one," said his lordship, sternly. "I daresay I did not mention to you before, Henrietta, that Harold is now coming home for good. He is old enough to dispense with the services of a tutor, and it is quite time that he began to apply himself to learning something of the duties of his position."

Lord Earlsfield looked round the table as if inviting some remark, but the others seemed to have had their appetites suddenly sharpened towards the close of the meal, and were all engrossed in breakfast. His lordship pushed away his plate and sat stiffly back in his chair.

"He will occupy the north rooms at the

end of the corridor," said he at length; "you will be good enough to give orders, Henrietta."

"Is he better?" asked Mrs Firebrace, shortly. She stood in less awe of her brother than any of the others, and was the only one who dared to cross tempers with him.

"I was not aware he had been unwell, madam," snapped his lordship, with a frown. "So far as I know, there has been nothing the matter with him since he got better of that low fever in Florence two years ago. When Carshalton last wrote me, Harold was in excellent health and spirits. You, at least, will be glad that Harold is coming home, Mary," he added, turning to Miss Donne with a nervous wistful smile. "The house must be dull for you without any companion of your own age."

"We shall be glad to see him again," said George, with an effort at affectionate geniality, prompted by the thought of that interview in the library that was still before him. "Let me see, he will be twenty-one at midsummer, won't he? You will have to do something handsome to celebrate his majority."

"We have never yet had to do anything to celebrate our majorities," returned Lord Earlsfield, gloomily; "when the town of Earlsport was mindful of its obligations to our house, the inhabitants never omitted to celebrate the coming of age of the heir of the manor in a fitting fashion. In their present frame of mind the best service they can offer to me or to my son is to take no notice of the event. When you have finished breakfast, George, you will find me waiting you in the library;" and my lord stalked glumly away, leaving the member to hastily swallow the remainder of his tea and to follow him.

"Heaven help us!" said Mrs Firebrace, in a low voice, when the door had closed upon her brother. "What is to become of us? Our lives won't be safe in the house with Harold. Lady Whitehead, who was staying in the same hotel in Geneva, says he becomes quite outrageous when contradicted. He broke a waiter's arm in one of his passions, and Captain Carshalton had to pay ever so much money to pacify the man."

"I am going in June," observed Dorothy, indifferently, "so I shall be well out of the way. Besides, the poor fellow always liked me."

"Of course you will go," bridled Mrs Firebrace; "who ever heard of you staying anywhere where you could be of any use? Ever since you got that money you have never been good for anything. No good comes of making a woman too independent. Poor Major Firebrace always said so."

"I can easily imagine that he had reason to make the remark," said Dorothy, drily.

"Poor Harold!" broke in Mary Donne, to check the growing tendency to sisterly amenities. "Perhaps his mind has grown more settled; and we must try, for Lord Earlsfield's sake, to make as much of him as we can."

"Make much of him!" re-echoed Mrs Firebrace. "Who can make much of a madman? You don't know the moment he may fly at you. It is a shame—a selfish shame of Lord Earlsfield to bring him here, when he would be so much better looked after in a private asylum. It is all his pride, and as the Bible says, 'Pride goeth before destruction'—so we shall be murdered or the house burned down," she added, emphasising the text and her application of it with a sniff.

"Yet one can't blame him," said Dorothy, with a sigh; "it would be very hard to shut the poor boy up. And of course Earlscourt is Olafe's own, and he can bring any one here he likes."

"Yes; but he has no right to endanger other people's lives," retorted Mrs Firebrace. "It is very easy for you, Dorothea, to speak so when you can do anything you please and go anywhere; but what is to become of me? Ah! if poor Major Firebrace had only been alive, all would have been so different."

"According to your own account the difference would not have been in your favour. How often do you say that you went about in terror of your life when the Major was in his tantrums? And don't you always tell us you never knew a day's happiness until he was dead?"

"True happiness," retorted the widow, shifting her position to a religious vantage-ground—"true happiness, I said, which is quite another thing from what people of this world mean by happiness. Major Firebrace was not a Christian certainly, and if he had lived my soul might have been exposed to peril like his. But he could always protect his wife from a dangerous lunatic."

"As the dangerous lunatic is your own nephew, I think he might come within the range of your Christian sympathies," answered Dorothy, with the faintest suspicion of a sneer. "You are always preaching to me about bearing crosses, and now that you have got one you don't seem to relish it over-much;" and gathering up her letters and envelopes very carefully from the table, Dorothy swept upstairs to her own room.

"You hear how she scoffs, Mary, my dear," groaned Mrs Firebrace, with a shake of her head. "I fear poor Dorothy is very unregenerate. My aunt's money has been anything but a blessing to her. What a vast amount of good she might do with her means if she only took an interest in Christian work, instead of which she spends it all upon herself, going about alone to all sorts of out-of-the-way places in a way that can't be right. I trust she may yet be awakened. We must all wait for the troubling of the waters, and I can't but feel for her when I think that I was once myself as nearly lost as she is. Yes, my dear, if I had died when the Major died I should have just gone to hell with him. But the girl is gone."

It was too true. No sooner had Mrs Firebrace thrown back her head and fixed her eyes on the ceiling, as was her custom when she desired to deliver herself of a sermon, than Mary Donne had stolen softly from the room; and the mistress of Earlscourt, with a sigh for the levity of those among whom her lot was cast, gathered up her keys and sought the housekeeper to concert preparations for the heir-apparent.

CHAPTER XIII.

HECKLING THE MEMBER.

Meanwhile the conference in the library had been going on not very much to the satisfaction of either of the parties engaged in it. The blandness which Lord Earlsfield had displayed at breakfast had been banished by the too evident consternation which the news of Harold's coming had spread at the table; and before the conversation opened, George felt that he would sell his chance of any immediate pecuniary relief for a very slight equivalent.

Settling himself stiffly at his writing-table, and motioning his brother to a chair in front of him, Lord Earlsfield arranged his papers with a magisterial air, placed his spectacles on his nose, and commenced. "May I presume to inquire what your plans are—if you have formed any—in the event of a general election? I have it on good authority that if Ministers are defeated on this Irish business they intend to go to the country."

"My intentions?" asked George. "Why, of course I shall do whatever you wish. I don't suppose you will let the borough go out of the family without a fight."

"I should of course be sorry to see the 'borough go out of the family,' as you say," returned my lord drily. "A Colpoys, or a Colpoys's nominee, has sat for the borough since the Long Parliament; and until you were returned I am bound to say the obligation has always been on the side of Earlsport."

"I don't see why you should come down upon me as the exception," grumbled George, doggedly. "Haven't I always done just as you wanted me, and voted as you desired me? The only real quarrel I have ever had with the constituency was when I voted against my party on Reform at your request and went into the Cave."

"It appears to me," said Lord Earlsfield, loftily, "that you are utterly ignorant of the most elementary principles that should influence the mind of a legislator. If your own judgment is not strong enough to direct your vote, I think you ought to be extremely grateful to any one whose experience of politics and interest in the welfare of the country came to your assistance."

"Well, so I am," said George, hastily; "you know I have always had unbounded confidence in your opinion; and I don't think you can say I have failed to take advantage of it."

"Yes, sir, you have," said Lord Earlsfield, sternly. "I do not allude now to the mere matter of voting, but I must say that you have not taken sufficient pains to cultivate your constituency. If you had exerted yourself as you ought to have done, we might have avoided the expensive contest of last election, as well as the dirt which the 'Mercury' and other scurrilous prints saw fit to throw at us. I can't in my position stoop to take up a conciliatory attitude to these Earlsport Radicals, who owe all they have to our family, and of course turn round to bite the hands that fed them; but you, sir—it should have been your task to pacify and humour them as far as a gentleman could."

"Damned hard all this!" said George to himself, "when it is his own domineering conduct that has put up every one's back; but I daren't tell him so." Then aloud, "Haven't I done all that any man can do? Don't I go about among 'em and shake hands all over the place? Didn't I lecture last winter in the Earlsport Athenæum on 'Richard Baxter'?"

"Yes, and got well ridiculed for your pains," said Lord Earlsfield, with a grim smile at the fun which the 'Mercury' had poked at George and his lecture. "And some one wrote to the Radical paper and showed that half your lecture was stolen from one of the Quarterlies. You may remember the 'Mercury' printed the original and your plagiarisms in parallel columns, with appropriate comments? That was another of your mistakes."

"Well, I gave a newspaper man ten pounds for it, and it ought to have been original for the money," retorted George. "And I am sure I always subscribe to these cursed local objects and charities, and all that kind of thing, when I have got any money to give them. They are dunning me just now for a contribution to the Earlsport Hospital, but I am so hard up that unless you——"

"And then you do nothing in Parliament, sir," interrupted his brother,—"absolutely nothing. You pair for more than half the session, and come here, on pretence of delicate health, for the other half. Look here," taking up two or three volumes from the edges of which white paper-markers ominously projected, "what did you do last session? On the 3d March you moved for papers relating to the Burstington colliery explosion——"

"And got them," put in George, with modest triumph.

"On 11th June you moved the adjournment of the House, and did not speak when the debate was resumed; and on 4th August you called the attention of the Board of Works to the ventilation of the smoking-room of the House of Commons. Now, sir, I put it to you, is that a creditable session's work for a member of Parliament?"

"Why the devil *does* Hansard index these books of his?" groaned George, inwardly; "he could never have fished out all that if he had had to go over the files of the 'Times.'"

"Well," he said, "I don't see how I can help it. I did well enough as long as I had the Muddleham Point Lighthouse to go upon. That was always good for one speech a session, and might have been so still if these asses of the Trinity House had not gone for it in earnest and built it. Really, nowadays there is nothing so preposterous that you can take it up with the certainty that it will last you as a subject. Some meddlesome fool of a secretary is always sure to come and do what you want, and then you are all adrift again."

"Bah!" said Lord Earlsfield, "I don't mean these petty local things. *I* applied myself to politics—to politics in the higher sense of the word. The very first session I was in the House I spoke to a motion of Lord Althorp's on Reform. Why do you not make yourself master of some great subject that would command the attention of the House and the country? There are plenty of questions, such as India, or the Colonies, or Army Reform, or Russia in Central Asia, that you might easily take up."

"There are fellows," said George, slowly, "that have got one or other of these things for their own special fads, and the House is so much pestered by them that it won't stand outsiders. Besides, these fellows themselves are down upon any one who meddles with their subjects as if they were poachers. But if you really think I should go in for something of that kind, I'll have a shy at it. The colonies are all pretty well picked up — even the smallest of them. But I'll take a look at them. I got a Blue-book about Prince Edward's Island the other day. Somewhere in America I think it is, if it isn't in the Malay Archipelago. It must have a Government, or an Assembly, or something of that sort, that wants pitching into," mused George, his legislative ambition warming up at the thought. "I think I'll take a look at Prince Edward's Island, and see what can be made of it, if you approve."

"Umph," was Lord Earlsfield's very doubtful response.

"And I'll set to work and go about the

town a bit. I'll drop into the Exchange and the Club to-day, now I think of it. Alderman Hanmer has asked me to dinner next Tuesday. I didn't think of going; but after what you have just said, I shall accept his invitation."

"Faugh!" was Lord Earlsfield's only comment on this practical application of his lecture.

"And," continued George, making a rush at the subject which lay nearest his heart, "it would be well to throw out a few subscriptions. There is the Hospital and the Lifeboat—that catches the fishermen; and a few guineas to the soup-kitchen would do me a deal of good. But I am absolutely run out. I have had heavy calls upon me. If you could see your way to letting me have some money just now, we would get the full benefit of it when the election comes round."

"Not a farthing," said his brother, promptly. "If you can't contrive to get along on your income, you must find means to add to it by your own exertions. It seems to be taken for granted in this family that I am to supply all its members with unlimited means of extravagance, and worse. Read that, sir," said Lord Earlsfield, taking a note from his desk between his finger and his thumb, and tossing it over to his brother with an expression of intense disgust; "read that insolent epistle, and judge for yourself whether I am to submit to be made an object of prey to all who, to my sorrow, can claim relationship with me."

The letter was at all events short, and to the point:—

12 Shafto St., Camberwell,
Friday morning.

My dear Earlsfield,—I trust you won't mind my taking the liberty of asking you to lend me £350. I would not venture on such a request upon the supposition of any regard of yours for me personally; but I know your horror of anything like an *esclandre* connected with our name, and I feel that I am doing you a service in enabling you to prevent it. I have got an execution in the house, and shall be in jail on Monday; and the whole business will be in the Society papers by the middle of the next week, unless you can see your way to oblige me with the sum I have mentioned (£350), which will just suffice to make matters square.—Believe me, my dear Earlsfield, your affectionate brother,

James Colpoys.

"There, sir," said Lord Earlsfield, when George had read the letter, "what do you think of that?"

"Poor Jim!" sighed George, "I daresay he is in a bad way. I must say he is a cool hand to write in that way," he added, while a stray wish crossed his mind that he himself could have courage enough to treat his elder brother in the same cavalier fashion.

"Grossest impertinence!" ejaculated Lord Earlsfield, rising in wrath and pacing the room. "*Esclandre* indeed! As if there were any scandal that human wickedness can cause that he has not already connected with our name. Why, even in the Society papers that came in this morning he is figuring: 'The bay mare has again sold her backers,'" continued my lord, reading from one of the obnoxious prints, "'and among others who have come a cropper over the Liverpool Meeting, we understand that the Honourable Jim Colpoys has sustained the worst injuries.' Jim! The Honourable Jim!! Cropper!!! I wish from my very soul he would break his neck."

"I told him the bay would sell him," muttered George to himself. And then aloud, feeling that he must make a last charge, even if it was a forlorn-hope, "But my request is a very different one. You wish me to be returned again for the borough, and it is perfectly impossible that I can keep up my position as a member, to say nothing of pleasing the constituency, unless you lend me a hand just now."

"Why don't you try your sister?" snapped his lordship. "She has plenty of money, and nothing to do with it, and I understand she has repeatedly helped you before."

"She can't, or she won't, now," replied George, gloomily. "She told me the other day that it would take her all her time to keep things square until she got her summer dividends, and that she could not give me a fraction sooner."

"That is very odd," said Lord Earlsfield. "I happened to learn by accident the other day that she had drawn eight thousand pounds quite recently. Have you any idea, George, what Dorothy does with her money?"

"None whatever," replied the member, ruefully. "She used always to be good for something to me until within the last six or eight months."

"Strange," remarked Lord Earlsfield, meditatively. "I don't think she is extravagant on herself, and I don't know any tastes that she has to explain such an outlay. You don't think she plays while she is on the Continent, do you?"

"She hates it," returned George, with a positive air. "Why, when I was at Cannes with her the winter before last I could never get her to go to Monaco. That is, of course, I didn't want to go there to play; but—well, I thought the sight might interest her, you understand?"

"Yes, I understand perfectly, sir," rejoined the other, with severe emphasis; "but what I don't understand is how your sister, since she does not play herself, and declined to allow you the means to gamble at Monte Carlo, manages to get through her income in the way she does. However, it is no business of mine. Her aunt, like a senseless woman, left the money perfectly uncontrolled, and so long as she does not touch her principal I am not going to interfere."

"She has a fad for art and artists, but that need not take so much," observed the member, in dense ignorance of the costliness of such dissipation; "and I must say she is very liberal generally. She gave three hundred and fifty for the sorrel horse she made Harold a present of when they were in Vienna. By the way, what an excellent chance the general election will afford of showing Harold something of how politics are practically worked among us!"

"Ah!" sighed Lord Earlsfield, sitting down again and resting his head on his hand. George had changed his tactics with such rapidity as to catch him without the proof-armour which he usually put on when his son was in question.

"I can take him about with me," continued the artful member, pressing the advantage which he saw he had gained, "and make him known to every one, and show him how local interests are managed, and where the wires are pulled. He could not have a better chance of gaining useful experience for the position he will have to occupy. Besides, his presence would do me a world of good. You can't mix in these matters, but it would give me points to have the future Lord Earlsfield actively supporting me. It would make matters much more pleasant with the town, as well as give him a start in popularity. But as you don't think of taking an interest in my standing, there is no good in talking," he concluded, with a prolonged sigh.

Lord Earlsfield still leaned his head upon his hand, and as the member saw that he was much moved, he felt half ashamed of the part he had played. "But it was my only card," he apologised to himself; "and if he had just behaved like a Christian, I would not have tabled it."

"George," said Lord Earlsfield with an effort, as he looked fixedly into his brother's face, "you must know as well as I do how the matter stands. God knows whether or not Harold will ever be able to face public life. It is some years now since he has had anything like a serious attack. Carshalton is hopeful; and the Paris doctors say that it is quite probable that the cloud may altogether pass from him as he grows older. But they are against excitement — above all, against thwarting him on anything his mind is deeply set upon. What you propose is very thoughtful, and if he is at all able to go about and mix in public matters, your companionship would be of the greatest possible advantage. You would be more of a companion to him than I could be, for I daresay I am not sociable—I never was. I never thought you a bad fellow, George. You have been extravagant, and idle, and unconscientious"—the member winced as each of these traits was enumerated— "and I have been exceedingly vexed that you have made no headway; but I think that perhaps you have a kinder nature than any of us others. If you can befriend Harold, you establish a claim upon me that it would be sinful to disown. God knows I would give my own life and spend my last farthing, if that would keep my poor boy in his sane senses when I am gone!"

"Earlsfield," said the member, springing to his feet and seizing his brother's hands with a burst of genuine feeling, "I shall stand by your son while there is a breath of life in me. I swear it to you before God. I am not a good man; I never set up for being one; but Harold shall never get harm for me, and I shall watch over him as if he were a son of my own. I was a beast to speak of him to you just now as I did, when I knew so well how you must be troubled about him."

The two stood hand in hand, each looking earnestly into the other's face, with a bond of more brotherly feeling between them than they had perhaps felt since childhood.

"No, no," said Lord Earlsfield, "it is as well. We shall understand each other better in future, now that we have spoken of him. Leave me now, George, and I shall remember to send you a cheque on Brancepeths' this afternoon."

CHAPTER XIV.

A MATTER OF BUSINESS.

THE most acute interest in gossip begins to pall in time. Stephen Brancepeth's return had ceased to be more than one of the commonplaces of Earlsport small-talk; and though no one pretended to deny that there was a mystery connected with him, or could assert that he had fathomed it when subjected to cross-examination, the fact remained that Brancepeth was possessed of money, a good house, and his old position in society, if he cared to take it up. Here were positive facts, and Earlsport liked to have positive facts when any one's status was in question.

At the Earlsport bank, whither business not unfrequently took him, the clerks had become habituated to his visits, and no longer received him as if he carried explosive elements about his person, but recognised his preferential claim to courtesy and prompt attention. His old friend Mr Jellicoe would venture to engage him in little conversations, would mention small items connected with the business of the bank which he was not in the habit of discussing with lay customers, and would show his interest in all Stephen's doings in many little ways. He kept the young man's account carefully under his own eye, and often in his leisure moments looked at the details, as if some light might be thrown by them upon the source from which they were derived. The worthy old man had more than once endeavoured to interest his principal by mentioning, among other news of the counting-room, Mr Stephen's calls; but the banker had shown no curiosity or disposition to inquire about his son's movements.

When Stephen Brancepeth strolled into the Earlsport Bank a day or two after he had received his father's note, he found that he was evidently expected. Mr Jellicoe, leaving Mr Hurst, Lord Elsedale's coal-agent, although he was one of the best customers of the bank, fluttered up to him with a "Mr Brancepeth will be glad to see you, sir," and himself ushered Stephen along the dark passage which the young man knew so well, and with the announcement, "Mr Stephen, sir," roused the banker from his labours. Mr Brancepeth looked up with rather a severe expression at his son and the old cashier standing in his door. "Mr who?" he inquired rather sharply; and then in more courteous tones, "Ah yes, I am obliged by this attention. Will you be seated, and excuse me for one moment? We shall not need to detain you, Mr Jellicoe," and he once more resumed his addition of a long column of figures.

When Jellicoe had retired with an appealing look to Stephen, the latter, having seated himself in as nonchalant a manner as he could assume, was able to note the changes that had passed over his father's face since he last saw it. Yes, Mr Brancepeth had decidedly aged. His cheeks were more sunken, there were more furrows in his brow than Stephen was familiar with, and his white hair was retreating still farther and farther from the bald spot on his crown. His eyes, too, had retreated, but their keen fire was yet undimmed when he glanced from under his grey eyelashes, and the lines of the mouth were hard and firm as of yore. It was not a face that suggested yielding or compromise, and Stephen rapidly recalled many unpleasant recollections; and with the memory of the last and most stormy encounter crowding back into his thoughts, all the native obstinacy of the Brancepeth blood took possession of him. He shifted in his chair, took out his watch, and then looked towards his father as an intimation that he was waiting upon him for his pleasure.

Mr Brancepeth wrote down a total, made a note on his blotting-pad, and looked up at his son. "You have come back, Stephen, I understand," he said, in his usual deliberate matter-of-fact tones. "Will you not shake hands?"

"Certainly, sir," said the son, who was quite taken aback by this request. He had rehearsed the interview with his father over and over again, and had perfected himself in the parts which he might have to play; but here he was at the outset cast for a *rôle* which he had not studied.

He went up to the table and took the hand which the old man extended to him. Their eyes met, but there was no gleam of feeling, no light of affection, interchanged between them. Stephen felt the sense of past wrongs burning more and more within, and with difficulty restrained the bitterness he felt. His father was cold and collected, and carefully feeling his way. "Sit down," said the banker, motioning Stephen with a wave of his hand to a chair nearer his own desk. He himself sat down again in his usual seat and mechanically took a pencil in his hand.

"So you are living at the Dunes House?" said Mr Brancepeth at last.

"Yes; I have bought it, as perhaps you are aware. The purchase was made through your bank."

"Your fortunes seem to have prospered since the date of your last letter to me."

"If they have, you must be well aware that they owed nothing to your assistance," said Stephen, unable to suppress the bitter retort.

"Quite correct," replied his father calmly; "I have no wish to claim any credit for your success. But I do not suppose that you have made yourself independent by your own exertions?"

"You are quite right. With my previous training I found myself quite unqualified to do anything by my own exertions, and had therefore to accept the starvation to which you abandoned me."

"Exactly as I thought," commented Mr Brancepeth, quite unmoved. "You will do me the justice to recollect that I warned you whither the course you chose to embark upon would lead you;" and the banker mechanically made a mark on his blotting-pad as if he were scoring to himself in the controversy.

"I only remember that when I was sick and reduced to my last shilling, my distress compelled me to ask your help; and I have never since ceased to reproach myself for this weakness."

"Naturally, for I took no notice of your letter: it was no part of my plan to do so," observed Mr Brancepeth, in his most measured and matter-of-fact way.

"Fortunately for myself," said Stephen, in high indignation, "I was able to make my way outside the sphere of your plans. And now, if you will be good enough to let me know why you have sent for me, I shall be obliged. You broke all the natural ties that were between us; and now, thank God! I am independent of you, and I do not choose to have my mind embittered by having all these painful memories revived."

"Nor did I send for you with any such object," said the banker. "I simply desired this interview upon a mere matter of business, — to suit my own views, and perhaps to serve your interests, should my proposals recommend themselves to you. If you will permit me to put a few inquiries to you, I can assure you that they are prompted by no feelings of curiosity or enmity, or even of — of natural affection, as the expression goes, but are made on purely business grounds."

Stephen bit his lip, and reflected for a little. "Well, sir, your questions?" he at length said; "but I must warn you that I shall exercise my discretion in answering them or not, as may seem good to me."

"You will be guided by your own judgment," said the banker, with a formal inclination of the head; "and now, will you tell me whether or not you are possessed of independent means?"

"I am in command of means which are sufficient to justify any gentleman in regarding himself as independent."

"Will you tell me how you became possessed of this money?"

"I shall certainly decline to do so."

"Quite so," returned the banker meditatively. "And now I must apologise for my next query. May I venture to inquire if you still entertain an intention of marrying Miss — Miss Sparshott, I think, was her name?"

Stephen flushed angrily, and half rose from his seat. "I think, sir, you might have spared me the necessity of paying this tribute to the success of your harshness. But, for the young lady's sake only, I feel bound to declare that I can never marry Miss Sparshott."

"I merely asked as a matter of business," said Mr Brancepeth, simply. "I assure you I am as desirous to avoid any subject likely to raise further bad feelings between us as you can be. And now to my next question. Are you married already?" and the old man bent his keen eyes full upon his son's face.

Stephen involuntarily started, but controlled himself, and met his father's intent gaze with a look equally penetrating.

"That question, too, I must decline to answer," he said.

"Just so," responded the old man, as his eyes fell upon the table, and he abstractedly made another mark upon his blotting-pad. Again he looked up. "One question more, and I have done. Is there any circumstance connected with your present position, with regard to the money you are possessed of, which, if the world, if society, were acquainted with it, would prejudice your credit as a man of honour and honesty?"

"I might rightly resent such a question," replied Stephen; "but as the name of

Brancepeth is common to us both, it may reassure you to know that nothing which I have done will in any way lessen its respect."

"I believe you," said his father, with more feeling than he had hitherto shown; and he sat for some time apparently immersed in thought.

At last he looked up, and, turning to his son, said, "You have answered me so far, but I cannot say that I am much wiser. I shall now tell you why I have sent for you, and the proposals I have to make to you. It will take some time, and I beg you will hear me to the end without interrupting me. When you have heard me out, you can state your own views, and decide for yourself. Since the breach occurred between us, I have naturally had to think a good deal as to how my wealth and business were to be disposed of after my death. With regard to my wealth there would have been little difficulty, and I have thought of several schemes which might be promoted by it, though none of them is much to my satisfaction, for I am no believer in founding charities. I have, however, a scheme here," and he tapped his drawer, "for endowing a chair in Cambridge for teaching the principles of banking and practical finance, which may serve my purpose as well as any other, should I be obliged to have recourse to it. So much for my money. But with regard to my banking business the matter is widely different. I suppose a man of taste," and the banker could not repress a bitter sneer towards his son, "will ridicule the idea that a petty provincial banker should feel any sort of sentiment about the business of his father and grandfather, and his great-grandfather, coming to an end in his own person, as if he were the last descendant of an old baronial house dating from the Conquest, on the verge of extinction. Well, I feel it is a weakness, but I cannot divest myself of it. This house was built by Brancepeth brains, and by hard work and honourable ambition, and now the work that has been carried on so long and so successfully seems likely to come to an end when I lay down my pen.

"I could easily bring fresh blood into the firm," he continued, after a short pause. "There are many excellent and able men of business who would only be too eager to obtain a partnership in Brancepeth Brothers. They might even improve the business, for I daresay I am getting rather behind the times. But though the old name might be kept, the old directing Brancepeth spirit would be gone. New men might even drag the old name through the dirt. Or I might still keep the bank 'Brancepeth Brothers' if I chose to allow the little word 'Limited' to be put after it. The shares would fetch a fine premium, and reach a quotation which would make the Metropolitan and Rural open its eyes. But no; I have thought of all this over and over again. The bank came into existence with the Brancepeths, and when there is no longer a Brancepeth to carry it on the shutters will be put up."

Mr Brancepeth had fallen into half-musing tones, talking as much to himself as to Stephen, who, in spite of his resentment, could not help being touched by the idea of lonely and driftless old age that was thus brought home to him. And he too, after all, was a Brancepeth, one of those men who made this business; and he looked back upon his early youth when the bank was to his boy's mind an institution not less splendid than the Bank of England, and Brancepeth Brothers an ancestry scarcely less exalted than those of the peers of the realm. It was with more subdued feelings, and with a rising wave of sympathy that he heard his father resume.

"As you know, I had once intended that you should succeed me in the business. Then when you chose to thwart my wishes and to openly disobey me, I dropped the idea. Now that you have returned to Earlsport without any profession, and are evidently living a life of idleness, it has occurred to me to make you another proposal. If you enter the bank as my partner, with such a share of the profits as will prove a handsome addition to your present means, if you do your best to master the business, and give me satisfaction—I mean purely in our business relations," he added, as he perceived some signs of irritated impatience on Stephen's part—"and an assurance that the bank will be carried on in the old ways after I am gone, I shall leave you the business and the whole of my money. Do not misunderstand me," he went on, as he noticed on Stephen's part signs of interruption. "I make you this proposal on no grounds of natural relationship, nor from any affection that might be supposed to exist between us. You bear the name of the firm: I have a confidence, well or ill founded, that the old established credit of the house would be safe in your hands; and therefore it is more to my taste to leave the business to you than to throw away my money on charity. Now you have my proposals, and I have frankly told you my motives: it is for you to say how far they meet your views. I may be pardoned, however, for saying, as an old man speaking to a young man, that a life of idleness is not the best career for one in the full vigour of bodily and mental activity."

Stephen sat silently, while his father turned away and played with his pencil and tapped the red-taped and docketed files that were lying before him on the desk. Affairs had taken so unexpected a turn that he felt his head whirling round—could not think, far less speak. Here was all that he had so bitterly regretted the loss of once—the Brancepeth wealth—now offered for his acceptance, and he might spurn it if he chose. He had once looked forward to that partnership now offered him as a happy and natural future, but mixed up with it had been visions of a pretty house on the banks of the Else, and Cloete Sparshott a sweet wife among the roses to welcome him when he escaped from the ledgers and bill-books of Brancepeth Brothers. Then came the memory of his losses, his bitter struggle with penury when an offer such as was now made to him would have been his salvation, and he felt inclined to cry out, "To the workhouse or the hospital with your money! What have I to do with it now?" But as he looked again at his father and thought of the struggle the hard old man must have gone through to go thus far, of his reverence for the family name—which was Stephen's own too—and for the family work, he could not help feeling touched. After all, the victory was with him, Stephen, however his father might seek to minimise it by the footing on which it was placed, and he felt he might be generous under the circumstances. So he resolved hastily to meet his father in his own mood.

"Well, sir," he said at length, "I confess your proposal has taken me a good deal by surprise. Your confidence of course flatters me, and the greatest respect I can show both to you and to it is to think carefully over the matter. I suppose you do not wish me to give you an immediate answer?"

"Certainly not," promptly returned the banker; "a partnership in Brancepeth Brothers is not a responsibility to be undertaken without reflection. You are at perfect liberty to satisfy yourself as to the position of the house and as to my private affairs, since these enter into the proposed arrangement." He rang one of several bell-knobs close to his chair. "Mr Jellicoe," he said, when the cashier quickly made his appearance, "you will give Mr Stephen Brancepeth any information about the business of the bank that he may require, and show him any of the books, my private accounts and all, that he may wish to see. You will find Mr Jellicoe a most trustworthy guide in all matters relating to the firm. And I believe," he added, when the cashier had again quitted the room, "that a little trouble will convince you that your future position will be a good one—that your influence will be very considerable here and in the counties round about, and that you might marry into the peerage without any charge of presumption."

Stephen started and cast a searching look at his father, but the old man's face was impassive. "I need detain you no longer," he said. "Take your own time to think over the matter, and when you have made up your mind, come and dine with me and let me know the result. You can dress and sleep in your old room, which you will find as you left it;" and father and son formally shook hands, and each thought that he detected a warmer pressure in the other's grasp than on their first meeting.

In the dark passage Stephen ran against Mr Jellicoe, whose face was contorted into an idiotic expression of delight.

"I knew it would all come right, Mr Stephen—I knew it from the first," whispered the old man. "Providence would never allow an old house like Brancepeth Brothers to come to an end. It could not do without it, sir, no more than it could do without the Bank of England — which it would be rank atheism to suppose such a thing. You are a lucky man, Mr Stephen."

"Luck sometimes comes too late, Jellicoe," returned Stephen, gloomily. "If it had come to me two years ago, things might be very different."

"Money is always in time whenever it comes," said Mr Jellicoe. "And if you have been kept tight a bit, it will be all the better for you now. Want of money makes you know the worth of it, and if you have got hardened and soured a bit you will make all the better man of business. There's no bowels in banking. Look at your father: he is hard as flint, and what a success he has been! Now as for me," added Mr Jellicoe with a sigh, "my good-nature would run any business into the 'Gazette' in a fortnight. Thank God! I have no means of exercising it."

"You never failed to employ it on my account, Jellicoe," said Stephen, pressing the old man's hand, "and believe me, I am not ungrateful."

"Mr Stephen Brancepeth does not look as if he relished fat veal, if that was the lunch the old man has been serving up to him in his room," said Mr Pemberton, a tall clerk, as he watched the banker's son pass out into the street.

"I don't know what his lunch was," said Mr Jellicoe, sententiously, "but Mr Stephen Brancepeth is a chip of the old block, and I wouldn't advise you, for your own good, Pemberton, to be over-free with any remarks upon him when he comes here as a partner in Brancepeth Brothers." Whereupon Mr Pemberton gave a whistle of surprise and applied himself to his ledger, and a look of intelligence ran round all the desks.

CHAPTER XV.

UNDER THE DEVIL'S NOSE.

Dr Sparshott was hurrying homewards to the Museum through the streets of Earlsport in a guise which, in the case of any other person, would have attracted general attention. His arms were encumbered by two or three goodly-sized volumes, which he had carried with him for reference on his ramble; a huge chunk of limestone rock, in which his keen eye had detected the presence of a fossil; and a large bunch of freshly gathered sea-weed, the oozy moisture from which was finding its way all down his garments. He had a small tin case strapped to his shoulder, and to this he had hung his stout walking-stick, as he had no hands free to carry it, and the stick, as he walked, rattled behind him with a clatter much like that which sounds so musical in the ear of a young officer when he first puts on a sword. But Dr Sparshott had no hat, and though there was a fresh cool breeze blowing in from the sea and up from the harbour, he did not appear to be at all conscious of the deficiency.

As he passed up a narrow lane, inhabited chiefly by working people, the women looked after him out of their doors, and the children perhaps paused in their play in the gutter to stare for a minute; but they were used to the Doctor's oddities, and scarcely thought his singular appearance worth a passing remark.

"The Doctor's maizelt agen," said one to another; "he's clean lost hissel amo' his stanes. But he's a cliver man the Doctor for nothing, besides paying five shillings to Dr Springfield." This was an allusion to the gratuitous medical services which the Doctor was sometimes dragged into rendering to the poorer classes in the neighbourhood of the Museum, and which he always accompanied by an emphatic protest against preserving the lives of possible paupers, and a denunciation of the empiricism of medical practice.

The Doctor hurried up the lane and turned into Earlsfield Square, quite unconscious that there was anything wrong in his outward man. Only as Mr Alderman Hanmer's carriage drove slowly past, and the Alderman's lady looked out from the window, was he recalled for an instant to the propriety of raising his hat in answer to her amazed salutation; but his arms were full of the books and the fossil, and, with an impatient shrug of the shoulders, he abandoned the effort. As he turned into the Town Hall the policeman in the vestibule looked askance, but saluted him, and smiled as he disappeared up-stairs. The Doctor's eccentricities were well known in Earlsport, and helped not a little to sustain his character as a man of genius, as eccentricities very frequently do, whether they come naturally or are judiciously put on.

"How late you are, father!" said Cloete, meeting him at the door. "Your dinner has been kept warming for you for the last two hours. I am afraid it will not be nice. And, oh! father, where is your hat?"

"My hat? Why, on my head, of course. Eh? Isn't it? Bless my soul, I must have left it at the Cliffs! Very stupid of me, to be sure. Just take that fossil into my study. From the teeth I should say it belonged to the Rhizopodus, but that they seem to want cutting edges. I would rather have expected to meet with it in coal shale, too. And I have got such a curious Loligo; you should have seen how the colour-specks came and went at the will of the cephalopod. The Loligo is the calamary, Cloete, although I don't suppose you know it even by that name. But where the deuce is the Loligo?"

While speaking, the Doctor had disencumbered himself of the tin box, into which he vainly looked for the specimen while he described it; plunging his hands into the capacious pockets of his coat, and turning out an unwholesome-looking *débris* of pebbles, shells, sand, and sea-weed; and again turning over the contents of his collecting-case, this time emptying them on to the table.

"Confound it! I must have left it behind. Let me see—I had it last at the Devil's Nose. Yes; it must be there. I rolled it up in a piece of newspaper, and put it down on a flat slab of rock while I was looking at the Rhizopodus—if it is a Rhizopodus, about which the teeth make me have my doubts. I would not lose that Loligo for money, for it is considerably differentiated from the kind usual here. I'll go back at once before the tide comes in."

"No, no," cried Cloete; "you are tired, and you want your dinner. Besides, your feet are wet, I can see; and oh! I do wish you would not walk home without your hat. What will the people in the streets think?"

"Pshaw!" returned the Doctor, testily; "the wind isn't cold, and I am none the worse. But I am not going to lose that Loligo; so get me another hat, Cloete, and I'll set off. I'll have all the better appetite by the time I come back."

"No, no," interposed Cloete; "I shall go myself. I shall easily find it, and the hat too, I daresay. The walk will do me good; and Mary shall get you dry stockings, and give you your dinner."

"Well," said the Doctor, reflecting that an immediate prospect of dinner was not without its allurements to an appetite sharpened by the sea-air, "if you do want a walk, I don't mind. And I would like to go into the Rhizopodus this afternoon. But if you go, you had better make haste before the tide comes in. You will easily find the Loligo, right under the Devil's Nose, on a slab of rock, wrapped up in a piece of newspaper. And I shouldn't wonder if my hat were by it. You will easily know the Loligo ; it is the ordinary calamary."

How far this last exposition was calculated to aid Cloete in the identification of the missing specimen need not be conjectured, but she was not unused to such quests. The Doctor's abstraction and confused habits of thought were manifested in daily acts of forgetfulness ; and a rival might have set himself up with a very fair collection by gleaning on the Doctor's track in his outdoor excursions. Cloete hurriedly made her simple out-of-door toilet, and having given instructions to the maid-servant to look after the Doctor's comfort, she went out, and walked quickly through the streets towards the sea-shore.

A breeze, half of spring, half of summer, was blowing in from the German Ocean ; and the sands were flecked with white foam-flakes blown off the crests of the surge as they broke up in a last effort to reach the shore. Before her lay a narrow marge of grey sands, stretching in a curve round the bay until it was lost in green undulating slopes, from underneath which rugged beetling cliffs stood forth to face the sea. On her left the Dunes, a succession of low sandhills, covered with hoary weather-beaten grass and bent, and here and there a bush of ling, rose and fell, and fell and rose again, until they were stopped by the high walls and thick dark woods of Earlscourt Park. Out at sea the water was dappled with foam-patches little bigger than curlews; and a little fleet of Earlsport fishing-boats with tall reddish-brown sails were busily employed hauling their lines. A brig or two were scudding along with full topsails to the north-eastward, and the black smoke of a distant steamer rose up on the horizon.

The salt breeze blew keenly against Cloete's face, and brightened her eye and heightened her colour. She had felt lonely and inclined to mope all day; but her spirits rose in the fresh sea-air, and as she gathered her blue cloak tightly about her, she felt music within her responding to the murmur of the waves and the swell of the wind.

As she walked along, through a break in the sandhills she saw the woody shrubbery of the Dunes House, and caught a glimpse of a white gable, from which projected an oriel window looking seaward. Did *he* ever sit at that window? He had always been fond of the sea, and Cloete could recollect the time when he had seemed to haunt the beach night and day. Perhaps he was sitting there looking from that window now, and might recognise her. Not so very long ago he would have known her a mile away, and would have hastened to her side. But now he did not care to waylay her in her walks as in the old days, and Cloete vainly endeavoured to persuade herself that she was glad of it. She had seen nothing of Stephen Brancepeth since they had met at Mrs Fossebraye's dinner-party, when he had too evidently shown his intention to avoid her. Now she did not want to see him. Of that she was determined to assure herself. She had loved him then, as he had sworn that he loved her, and would love her always. She loved him yet, but that must be her own secret, locked up in her own heart; and Cloete was so confident in her own strength of mind that she was sure she might cherish her feelings without any risk of betraying them. It was only natural that he should forget her as soon as he went out into the world and met with fairer and more fascinating girls. He was rich, too, and might make a great match; while what was she, to aspire to marrying him?—the daughter of a poor naturalist, whose oddities were the amusement of all Earlsport, a salaried servant of the mayor and corporation, who stood only a grade higher than Mr Wynes, his assistant, who had been a bird-stuffer—or taxidermist, as that gentleman was pleased to denominate it. Cloete had her own pride, and, when occasion required, she could stand up for her father's calling, and draw a distinction between the position of a man of science, however poor, and the pursuits of the rich traders of Earlsport, considerably to the social disadvantage of the latter. But to herself she could not help telling over all the drawbacks of her own condition. She had had her dream of love, and had awoke from it to find herself surrounded by the hard realities of life; but the world should never know anything more than it already knew, and, above all, Stephen Brancepeth should never discover how closely the old love still clung to her. She would never marry—all thought of that was over; and she could love Brancepeth, so long as she kept her love shut up in her own bosom, until he married. And when he did marry—ah! when he did, what then? She was twenty, and already her life lay behind her.

The place was full of memories. Here was the grassy knoll on which they had sat the night when they had last parted, when Stephen had told her of his quarrel with his father, and how, rather than give her up, he was prepared to face poverty, and strive to earn a living for them both by painting. She had pleaded with him then to do nothing rash; she had begged him with tears to give her up, to forget her; she had thrown herself on her knees beside him, and implored him to think no longer of her,—not to break with his father for her sake, whatever became of her; and now a feeling of irony mixed with the remembrance of that scene. How passionately had he sworn that he would give her up for no earthly consideration! He would dare disinheritance, and face poverty; toil for her, slave for her, but relinquish her—never! How proud she had been then of her lover, all sorrowful as she was at his evil fortune, so gallant, so devoted, and so self-sacrificing! How she had sorrowed at the desponding vein which she soon detected under the assumed cheerfulness of his earlier letters! Then came tidings of disappointment, failure, and privations. At last had come that dreadful letter telling her that he saw no prospect of keeping soul and body together in Europe,—that it would be unmanly in him to tie her any longer to a helpless pauper, who would speedily have to seek in Australia or America for some means of earning his bread. Cloete had sent an impassioned answer, saying she would go with him to the end of the world, and live on the scraps which he left, but no answer had been returned; and now Stephen Brancepeth was living in affluence at the Dunes House over there, while Cloete was hurrying along the beach to look for her father's hat, and that tiresome Loligo which is popularly called the calamary.

Retrospections like these have a morbid tendency, but the fresh sea-breeze is an excellent tonic. Cloete Sparshott is a young, spirited, healthy woman. She gathers her cloak still more tightly about her, pushes back the hat from her brow, and comes back to the object of her quest. She has reached the end of the sands, and she stoops to gather a freshly-blown sea-pink as she ascends the grassy slope which leads to the top of the cliffs. The view stretches out now, for she can see along the rock-bound coast for nearly half-a-dozen miles, as far as the tall white lighthouse which marks the dangerous reefs of Breakerness. But she has to descend again, for the sea comes in here into a little cove, lapping over a bed of white pebbles strewn over with dark-green sea-weed; and at the other side of the tiny bay stands up a huge black cliff, throwing out an overhanging protuberance, in the sharpened outlines of which sailors and fishermen had for ages seen a resemblance to a nose, which they naturally called after the Devil's; and sharp enough the infernal feature was found to be by such luckless mariners as were driven upon it in the hurricanes of winter. All round the margin of the grassy summit of the cliff were deep ruts, showing where ropes had been thrown and hauled to the crew of some unfortunate vessel perishing in the boiling whirlpools below, or clinging vainly to the sharp jagged rocks as a protection against the devouring waves.

The Devil's Nose itself was a huge spar of black rock, projecting out beyond the line of the other cliffs, and resting on a base of deep-red granite which pleased the popular fancy for a nostril, and of which the colour might have been taken to indicate convivial tendencies on the part of the arch-enemy. Between the Nose and the sea lay a square mass of rock known as the Devil's Snuff-box, leaving a narrow path between it and the Nose, by which one person could easily pass when the tide was out. Beyond this Cloete expected that she would light upon the Loligo, and perhaps the hat. She descended again to the water's edge, giving a glance towards the advancing tide, which was now creeping up the cove and beginning to curl itself in boiling foam about the rocks. But Cloete knew the cliffs well, and was experienced in the rise of the tides, and she saw that she had more than ten minutes to pass the Devil's Nose and get back dry-shod before the waters came up. She hurried through the narrow passage between the Nose and the Snuff-box, and just in the spot where she had expected to find the Doctor's hat and the Loligo she saw Stephen Brancepeth standing, with his hands behind his back, looking out to sea. She started back and thought of flight, but quick as the idea of flight had come into her head, Brancepeth had turned round and faced her. Flight, Cloete felt, was now impossible. She was by no means a nervous girl, and possessed more self-control than probably nine out of ten women with greater experience of the world could boast of. The force of the old memories, upon which she had just been dwelling, had, however, for the present, disarmed her to some extent. But it was only an instant before she could make the effort necessary to recover command of herself, and she had taken a step forward before Brancepeth could advance to meet her. He raised his hat and held out his hand.

"How strange that we should meet here!"

he said, with a hurried and rather faltering utterance. "I had just been thinking of you."

"My father forgot a specimen when he was here in the afternoon," returned Cloete, calmly; "and as he was tired, I came to fetch it. I think I see it yonder, and his hat too," she added, with a little laugh. "Good-bye, Mr Brancepeth. Please don't let me detain you."

With a stiff little courtesy and without offering her hand, Cloete stepped across the sands, amid which the waters were now beginning to creep in to a broad flat slab of rock on which she saw the Doctor's hat lying, with the Loligo beside it. She opened up the newspaper and looked attentively at the specimen—not from scientific interest, but that she might get leisure to gather her composure; and, as she told herself, she hoped—but did she so hope?—to allow Brancepeth time to get out of her way. But there he still stood, planted right in the centre of the narrow way between the Devil's Nose and the Snuff-box. The tide was now creeping up to the foot of the cliff, and there was no other way of retreat open, so she walked back, with a heightened colour but with a firm step, and carrying her head perhaps a little higher than she was wont.

But Brancepeth showed no disposition to move out of her path.

"Cloete," he said, holding out his hands, "this is not the way in which we expected to meet again when we last parted."

The girl said nothing, but did not take his hand. There was a tone of tender regret in his voice that threatened to shake her resolution to be firm. She would make no response to his advances, but she might at least hear what he had to say.

"We were both young then, Cloete, and people thought we were foolish," he went on, sadly. "I did not think so; I do not think so now. My love for you was a passion that can only be felt once and for all. I have never ceased to love you. There has never been a day, never an hour, since we parted, that my heart has not been full of thoughts of you. I love you now, as you stand before me, more passionately than ever. I do—God help me!"

There was a pathos in his tones that made Cloete tremble, though there was also something in his manner that she did not understand and that filled her with dread. She leaned against a mass of rock and allowed him to take her hand.

"It was your own wish," she faltered; "you wrote giving me up. You know what answer I sent you. Why should we speak of these things now?"

"Because," said Brancepeth, gloomily, "we cannot live, we cannot meet, without some understanding of what we are henceforth to be to each other. I got your letter, but it was months after it had been written. Had I got it sooner our lot might have been different. It reached me when I had just recovered from a dangerous illness, and after matters had occurred to me which made it too late to be of use to us. Cloete, dearest, your letter was the only thing wanting to complete my misery."

"In that case," replied Cloete, withdrawing her hand, "I am extremely sorry it was sent. I know now that it was foolish—it was wrong of me to have written as I did. I should have accepted the release in the same spirit in which you offered it to me. But I was only a simple girl, Mr Brancepeth, who knew nothing of the world," she added, flashing a look of indignant scorn in his face. "I apologise to you for answering your letter, and that is all I can do. You will permit me to pass now, if you please."

Cloete was now mistress of the situation. Her high maidenly spirit had come to her assistance. She could not conceive what Brancepeth's meaning was, but she felt that the time had come when she must decide for one course or another. Her firmness rose, her head grew clear, and she was determined that no outward sign of weakness should betray the conflict of mixed feelings that was going on within her.

"You misunderstand me, Cloete," said Brancepeth, still interposing himself before her. "I deserve your pity—perhaps your scorn. But still, for the sake of old days, for the sake of our old love, hear me speak. A barrier has come between us — one that can never be removed. I love you, Cloete, madly—better than my life—better than my soul; but, Cloete, dearest Cloete, I can never again ask you to be my wife."

"Your explanation is quite sufficient, sir," said Cloete, haughtily; "I wish to know nothing more. Perhaps you will show me the respect due to a lady by not again alluding to the matter. And now allow me to go."

But Brancepeth was not yet deep enough in the mire. He must flounder still farther in, as is the way with men who feel their footing going from under them.

"Let me at least hear you say that you believe in my love. I ask nothing from you in return. Night and day, until the hour of my death, you must continue to be the first thought in my mind. Let us at least be friends—friends now and when we meet again. It is hard to think that, after having loved as we have, we should part with coldness in our hearts. Oh! Cloete, would that you would let me be a friend to you, since I may not stand in a dearer relationship."

"It is impossible," said she. "I will hear no more of this talk. You have no right to take advantage of meeting me here to revive the subject;" and she forced her way past him, and ran swiftly through the narrow gallery between the Devil's Nose and the Snuff-box.

"Oh, the sea!" she exclaimed in despair as she reached the other end.

The tide was by this time in, and the pebbly strand which she had lately crossed was now a foot and a half under water, while the waves were washing up against the wall of rocks. The white stones glimmered dimly under the green water; and the sea-weeds, which had been lying so prone and limp as she passed over them, were now all alive, and swaying their tendrils backwards and forwards on the ebb and flow of the tide. Cloete paused and looked before her. She would have to wade some thirty yards through the water before she could get to dry land on the other side of the cove: but better that than be imprisoned for hours under the Devil's Nose with Stephen Brancepeth; to have to listen to love without confidence; to have to hear him pleading for her whole heart, while he was only offering her half a one in return; to have smouldering ashes raked up into a blaze, only that the flame might be put out for ever. To Cloete's practical mind, wet feet was a minor inconvenience compared with imprisonment under the Devil's Nose with Stephen Brancepeth. There was no danger. There was perhaps a dash of malicious gratification in the act, and she was just about to step in when Brancepeth caught hold of her arm.

"Stay, Cloete! You cannot cross. You may slip on the pebbles. Am I, then, so hateful to you that you cannot trust yourself with me until the tide falls?"

"I must go," said Cloete, positively. "My father is waiting for me at home. It is your fault, Mr Brancepeth. Had you allowed me to pass, I should have got over before the tide came in."

"Forgive me, Cloete. I could not let go the opportunity of speaking to you once again. I had much to tell you—much that you have refused to listen to. I will not say that you were wrong; but if you knew all—if you knew all that is in my heart—you would pity me. But you must allow me to carry you across."

"Certainly not," said Cloete, firmly; "I ought not to have allowed you to detain me under any circumstances. You will please let me go alone, Mr Brancepeth; I must not let you accompany me farther. I wish you good night again."

She had stepped down, and in another minute would have been in the water, but she felt herself seized and borne aloft through the tide. Oh! the grasp of those strong arms. As they encircled her, they seemed to imprison and subdue her mind as well as her body. She had felt a woman before; now she was as a child in his hands—as a captive slave that has no will but her master's. It was vain to seek to summon resolution to her assistance; she had none. Once before he had laughingly carried her through a pool that they had lighted upon in their rambles; and she felt as she had felt then. Time and change and the crosses in their love had all vanished from her recollection. As they neared the other side, he bent and kissed her lips as her head lay passively against his shoulder, and she had only power to turn away her face and sob.

As they reached dry land on the other side, Brancepeth set her down and stood irresolutely before her, looking into her face. Cloete's tears were falling fast, and she with difficulty restrained her sobs. All her former spirit had deserted her; she felt now so thoroughly humiliated, that she did not care to recover her self-possession.

How long they stood thus she could scarcely tell. At length Brancepeth took her hands and said, "You cannot understand all this, Cloete, nor can I explain it to you now. When you know all, you will not think so hardly of me—perhaps you will pardon me. We must learn to face our separate lots, but it will be hard. If I have wronged you, I suffer a heavy penance. God bless you!"

He raised her hand to his lips, lifted his hat, and set off with hurried strides, half running, across the sandhills, leaving Cloete standing by the shore. How the girl got home she could scarcely tell. The evening was falling, and a cold damp wind now blew in from the sea. The sullen roar of the waves seemed to menace her as if she had done some wrong. Sea-gulls wheeled overhead, shrieking stridently, as if they also had singled her out as the object of their indignation. The harbour light was throwing a fiery red gleam across the sands before she reached Earlsport, and she felt glad that the streets were so deserted. When she reached the Museum, she found her father fretting and fidgeting over her long absence.

"You are very late, Cloete," he said, pettishly; "you must surely have had a long walk."

"Yes, I had," was the reply, "and I feel very tired. But I have brought you the Loligo; and your hat too," she added, with a hysterical attempt at a laugh.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NIGHT-WALK.

On the evening when Brancepeth and Cloete Sparshott had met under the Devil's Nose, Dorothy Colpoys retired early to her room at Earlscourt. She had made neuralgia an excuse for going up-stairs, but that did not deter her from opening a window and looking out anxiously into the night. It was intensely dark,—so dark that the white foam on the breakers seen over the tree-tops seemed by contrast to light up the gloom; but the moaning waste of ocean beyond was unenlivened by the lights of any passing vessel, or even by the lantern at the mast-head of any belated fishing-boat wishing to signal to friends on shore that it was running over the bar. An uninviting night to look out upon, and still more to adventure into.

So Dorothy Colpoys might have thought as she turned round, after she had carefully closed the shutters, to the bright fire that was blazing in the room. But there was a look of excitement on her face and a bright sparkle in her eye that did not suggest a disposition to sit down and make herself comfortable. In general there was not much animation in Dorothy Colpoys's expression. She had regular features; a fair red-and-white colour; soft brown eyes, well shaded by rather heavy lashes; and, grievous to say, at the upper corners of her ripe mouth traces of silky down, which, however coveted by aspirants to the honours of manhood, are generally a heartsore to the other sex. Poor Dorothy had often had to bear the cruel witticisms of her brothers George and the Colonel—in the days before she got Lady Pye's money—on this tender subject, and had fretted herself over the depilatories and hair destroyers which they delighted to bring under her notice.

Sir Bernard Burke and his brother genealogists were mercifully silent about the ages of the ladies of the Earlsfield family, and only those who were old enough to remember Dorothy's birth could have told to a year or two how old she was. It was generally known, however, that she came next to George, the member for Earlsport; and unless an abnormally long period had elapsed between the two births, Dorothy Colpoys must now be steadily working her way through the thirties. She did not look her age certainly, and with her fresh bright colour, luxuriant hair, and well set-up figure, might have pretended to five-and-twenty with much more plausibility than many of the damsels who linger so long and so lovingly over that period of life.

The Colpoys face was divided into two types, the sternly grim and the good-humouredly inane, examples of each of which might be found in Lord Earlsfield and the member respectively; but Dorothy's countenance was flexible, and easily responsive to her immediate feelings. To-night her looks were lit up by an animation that made her eyes sparkle, and sent a colour to her cheeks which a blushing bride in her teens might have been proud of.

"Get me a thick serge dress and a hood and walking-boots, Minton," she said to her maid, a hard-faced middle-aged woman, who came in answer to her bell; "and get ready yourself. You are going to walk with me."

"It looks like rain, madam, and it is dark as pitch," replied Minton doubtfully, but without betraying any surprise at the untimely season which her mistress had chosen for outdoor exercise.

"So much the better—we are less likely to be seen," rejoined Miss Colpoys. "Go and get ready as quick as you can. I shall dress myself."

"I hope, madam, you do not mind what I said when I was dressing you for dinner," said Minton, turning round at the door. "Barnes, the gamekeeper, is a great tattle, and though he did say that he saw Mr Brancepeth of the Dunes House and Miss Sparshott, the Museum man's daughter, under the Devil's Nose before dusk, it mayn't have been either of them. Barnes *do* tattle."

"I never trouble myself about servants' gossip," said her mistress; "but be quick and make yourself ready." Hastily equipping herself in a thick dress, and throwing over it a cloak with a hood, which completely concealed her face, Dorothy paused for a moment in front of a looking-glass, and examined herself critically. "Heaven be thanked, I am looking well to-night—and young too! Yes, I do look young," she said to herself. "I suppose it is the thought of meeting him again. He was madly in love with that girl, I have heard. Has he forgotten her quite, I wonder? And how do they come to have meetings among the Cliffs? I shall tax him with it. It was unwise, after all, of me to insist upon him coming here against his own wish. He said, too, that he did not desire to come back to Earlsport to revive painful impressions; but I thought he meant his quarrel with his father. I shall see this girl for myself, and judge whether she is likely to be dangerous. But were she twenty times as beautiful as she can be, she shall not come between me and mine;" and as Dorothy stamped her foot in her vehemence, the wicked look which the Earlsfields could at times put on contorted her face for a minute, but quickly passed off.

"I can trust him," she murmured; "at the worst, I can make him own me as his wife, and then this Miss Sparshott will not trouble us. But there is my money. Ah, me! that dreary, dreary money; why did Aunt Pye leave it to me? Or why did she not let me do with it as I pleased? I wonder what keeps that tedious Minton?"

"I don't like this journey, madam," said Minton, entering. "The night is dreadfully dark; and listen!—how the wind is howling!"

"I don't like the night myself; but we are going to make the journey," returned her mistress.

"We may be discovered," urged the maid.

"The whole risk is mine," said Miss Colpoys. "Now, lock the room door on the outside, and follow me."

They stole noiselessly along the corridor and through the picture-gallery, where many Colpoyses and Swaynes hung upon the walls, dimly seen by the light of the taper which Minton carried. The Colpoyses, it may be assumed, were genuine portraits; but the presentments of most of the Swaynes had no better authenticity than the word of Horace Walpole, who discovered a complete collection of them in the course of his artistic researches, and put them at the disposal of his father's friend, Sir John—making him pay, it is to be presumed, more than the originals, when in the flesh, had ever been worth. Sir John was then scheming for a peerage, and ready to welcome any evidences of ancestry; nor did he ever lend an ear to Lord Chesterfield's malicious insinuations that they were the family portraits of one Stephen Swayne—a west-country squire, who had been executed in King William's time for complicity in Sir John Fenwick's plot, and who had never claimed any connection with the descendants of the Earlsfield Jarl. But there the pictures are; and the 'Guide to Earlsport and its Environs' tells the name and history of each individual Swayne among them, and Lord Earlsfield would have cheerfully pledged his credit to their authenticity.

From the end of the picture-gallery a narrow stair led down to an outer door, which stood in an angle formed by a wing of the house, and gave admittance to the flower-garden. Carefully feeling their way, Miss Colpoys and Minton noiselessly gained the open air, and stood for a minute in the darkness. The cold night-wind was blustering about them, the grass was soaking wet, and the black shape of the trees stood vaguely out, like giants stationed to bar their way.

"Miss Colpoys!" whispered Minton, as she clutched her mistress's arm—"Miss Colpoys! I'm frightened to death. I can't go a step farther, and I won't. There!"

"Nonsense, woman!" said Dorothy, taking firm hold of her. "You *shall* go. There, take my hand; I know the road quite well. We shall see much more clearly after our eyes have been used to the darkness a little. Not another word, but come along."

Half dragging the reluctant and terrified Minton after her, Dorothy walked quickly along a narrow footpath which lay close to the park wall, the dark shadow of which served them as a guide. The gravel was wet and claggy, and every now and then Minton, as her impatient mistress pulled her along, would stumble, and with difficulty resist an inclination to shriek. The owls had come out, and were answering each other in mournful hoots which grated on Dorothy's high-strung nerves; and a bat which made a reconnoitring swoop hard by their heads, caused both of them to start and cling more closely to each other. At last the door which stood in the corner of the park most remote from Earlsport was reached, and opened by a key which Dorothy produced. Before them lay the wide expanse of the Dunes, and beyond these a broad line of roaring white breakers. It was useless now to seek for a path, and Dorothy struck boldly across the Dunes in a direction where the darkness seemed blackest of all, and where she conjectured were the trees around Stephen Brancepeth's dwelling. The rough surface of the Dunes, with its slopes of slippery bent grass and its bottoms of wet sand and gravel, drew many a groan from Minton, as her relentless mistress hurried her on. Their dresses and feet were soaked, for every blade of grass dripped with water; but

Dorothy seemed quite unconscious of any inconvenience. Not so the unfortunate Minton, in whose mind no stimulant was working to make her insensible to the unwonted miseries she was undergoing. That sleek domestic would not have exposed herself to a passing shower by daylight for any consideration; and here she was, compelled much against her will to walk more than a mile—it seemed to her ten—in pitchy darkness, "as it might have been through a mill-pond," groaned the aggrieved waiting-woman.

Wading through the tall grass, stumbling now over heaps of shingle, at times barely escaping a fall into the shallow sand-holes—"bunkers" is the Earlsport expression for them—the pair reached the low ridge which encircles the Dunes House, and almost cuts it off from the rest of the world. The dark pine-trees that grew closely round it, and covered the slopes of the hollows on all sides, made the place seem filled with a cavern-like gloom. But there were lighted windows, unobscured by blinds or shutters, which threw a bright broad gleam on the gravel path leading to the door. Inside they could see some one pacing up and down a room, and pausing now and then to look forth into the darkness.

"Thank heaven!" said Dorothy, fetching a deep breath, and putting her hand to her heart, "we are expected. Go down, Minton, and tap at the window, and tell Mr Brancepeth I am here."

"Not for the world, ma'am," cried Minton, taking a closer hold of her mistress. "I shall faint as it is. There may be dogs. I might be shot for a burglar. I wouldn't quit you for a hundred pound!"

"You're a fool!" said Dorothy, contemptuously. "Don't you ever marry a husband until you have got a heart that can risk something for him;" and drawing a small dog's-whistle from the bosom of her cloak, she sounded a clear soft note, three times repeated, and fixed her eyes intently on the dark figure walking up and down the lighted room. It paused, came to the window, looked out, and then disappeared, and in a minute more the door opened, and Stephen Brancepeth came out to meet them.

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